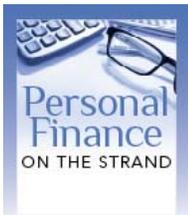




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DECEMBER 2011

Arts Feature: Gina Trimarco

Transplanted Chicago native finds the funny in Myrtle Beach

WRITTEN BY PAUL GRIMSHAW



The concept of teaching someone to be funny seems counterintuitive—people are born funny, right? And some people aren't. We all know how painful bad comedy can be. But comedy improv instructor and corporate trainer Gina Trimarco, owner and operator of the Carolina Improv Company and its home theater Uptown, concedes that while some people may be more naturally quick-witted and funny than others, anyone can tap into their "inner-funny," and she knows the secrets of getting there.

Anyone who's seen the Sacha Baron Cohen mockumentary Borat! has seen the best and worst of comedy instruction play out in a scene with an actual New York City-based comedy instructor attempting to teach the undercover Cohen, playing the part of a Kazakh journalist. The absurd, but all-too-real scene proved two points: You can't teach comedy on a blackboard, as this instructor attempts; and that improv, of which Cohen is a master, may be the purest and funniest form of comedy for both the comedian and the audience. Trimarco believes that the right kind of instruction can not only help anyone of any age be funnier, it can also improve skills such as public speaking, communication, listening and self-confidence.

"That's really what we stress here in Myrtle Beach, as opposed to how we might teach in other markets," said Trimarco. "We know most of our students won't go on to be performers, but the classes are fun and helpful in so many areas. Everyone can benefit from flexibility, adaptability, leadership, thinking in the moment." Since the school began in November 2008, hundreds of students have gone through successive courses, which begin with IMPROV 101 and go through IMPROV 301. The best and most willing are invited to become performers at Uptown, a theater space opened by Trimarco in a refurbished retail space at the Myrtle Beach Mall. The 80-seat venue hosts art shows, musical performances and recurring audience-

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interactive improv shows each week. The players, as those in the troupe are known, perform as they are available. The troupe has included students, doctors, retirees, professionals, cops, the young and the old, and they all bring their own unique sensibilities to roles that change every night. Improv is based on audience suggestions and interaction, so no two shows are ever the same. The spontaneity may look easy, but to be good takes practice.

The shows at Uptown are based loosely upon the popular TV show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* At the heart of improv is the concept of “Yes, and...,” a way to build on your improv partner’s comments, tap into your own creativity, and keep a fictional discourse moving forward, often with hilarious results. “The ‘Yes, and...’ concept is about saying ‘Yes’ to offers and ideas,” says Trimarco, “so that the two players can create something together. We teach students from beginner to advanced.”

Trimarco trained at the famed Second City comedy club and training center in her native Chicago. Founded in 1959, Second City has become arguably the most influential comedic training and proving grounds in history. Famous alumni include comedic superstars Mike Myers, Tina Fey, Alan Arkin, Fred Willard, John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, Stephen Colbert and Steve Carell. It was at Second City that Trimarco found her passion.

“I’d always been involved in the arts in some form or fashion since I was maybe 7,” she said. “From ballet and dance classes to school productions, professional theater, my entire life has been arts related. I was really into acting, but at college, as an accounting major at Northern Illinois University, I was having a crisis. I was hanging out with the theater majors and always trying to get on stage, but I felt out of place. Someone suggested I take classes at Second City, and that’s where it really started.”

In October 2011 Trimarco married her long-time companion Ted Cligrow, who is originally from Cleveland. Cligrow owns and operates Carolina Home Exteriors in Murrells Inlet. The two moved here in 2007 when Trimarco accepted a position as the general manager of Myrtle Beach IMAX. After ownership and management upheavals, Trimarco was out of a job, and that became the impetus to turn her hobby into a viable business. Carolina Improv Company won the Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce Business Innovation Award in 2009, and offers corporate training as well as adult and youth instruction. Six-week classes are offered throughout the year, and shows are staged most every Wednesday, Friday and Saturday evenings. Most shows are family-friendly, but some are classified as “appropriate for ages 18-and-up,” as the comedy rarely, but at times, can get adult-oriented. The theater is non-smoking and is licensed for beer and wine sales.

“Our snow bird audiences are hilarious,” said Trimarco. The winter crowds are a mix of locals, Canadians and northeastern U.S. retirees. “I have to remind them all the time to keep their suggestions clean—they crack me up.”

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