

SECOND CITY

Interview by LYNN FURGE

The lights dim and you wait; you wait to see if they can make you do it. You wait to see if they can make the entire audience do it. You wait for the laugh. And as I am sitting in Second City's 99th Mainstage revue South Side of Heaven, riffs on the Cubs vs. Sox rivalry get chuckles from the locals but miss the out-of-towners. Obama parodies get applause from the politicians.

A solitary man appears on stage. 'You know our love was meant to be', croons Peter Cetera. The comedian is active, dancing around the stage with a Chipotle takeout bag as the lyrics to "You're The Inspiration" pump through the speakers. In a daze, he mimics the kind of love that lasts forever, from tonight until the end of time—pulling out the burrito, seductively unwrapping, deep throating, and teasingly tonguing. Yes, he's fellating a burrito.

The entire audience roars.

Afterwards, the crowd filters out of the theater, many gazing at the program while murmuring to each other, "He was my favorite" or "She was the best." That recognition factor: one of the key things that makes something funny. Diana Martinez, President of Second City, has an entire list: Unique Point of View, Fish out of Water, Misfortune, Heightened Circumstances, Truth, Change of Status (little guy wins over the big guy), Game of the Scene (the audience getting the inside joke), Play to the Top of Your Intelligence. These are things that get a laugh. But as the world-renowned theater troupe knows, combine that teaching with the unexplained sparkle and you have

magic. 52 years of it, to be precise.

Second City grew out of The Compass Players, a group established at the University of Chicago in the late 1950s, which performed plays with a certain level of improvisation. Paul Sills was a founding member of the cast, and satire was key. The Players were not necessarily comedians; but had a strong scenic quality to their characters.

"That's what makes us unique. The scene is just as important as the laugh," explains Andrew Alexander, Co-Chairman, CEO and Executive Producer. "You don't see a lot of slapstick. Severn Darden could be really, really silly... John Belushi, Chris Farley, Mike Meyers, and John Candy—but within that, the characters have more depth; Candy could be sensitive as well. The hook is accented by the scene."

This recipe has remained unchanged, and has served them well. Second City now has over 15,000 students; between their stage shows and touring acts they entertain over one million people per year. Second City Network, the company's home for comedy videos created by the writers and performers, has 31.6 million hits, a channel view count of 1.5 million, and a subscriber base of just over 78,000 viewers.

The foundation, however, is built in education. We all know you can't "teach" funny. But you can teach the basic skills of how to build a scene. In the late 1920s, Paul Sills' mother Viola Spolin was a teacher at Hull House, a settlement house in Chicago. The games used to develop an improv actor today were originally used to encourage expression in immigrant children, teaching them to communicate better through exercises that crossed language and cultural barriers.

Millions of people think they are funny, and thousands try their hand at writing and performing under Second City's roof, but few get to make it onstage, whether it is at the company's home venue



ANDREW ALEXANDER



DIANE MARTINEZ

or elsewhere, post-education.

“People come in here with friends saying ‘Gosh you’re funny, you cracked me up at that party.’ But once they get here everything changes. I consider us a place of higher learning. We are kind of like the Harvard of comedy. Practical experience and education, you will get your doctorate here,” boasts Alexander.

Students enter the training center first in the three-tier system. Second City instructors work with them on how to improvise, how to develop a scene, how to hone their voice. Once on the main stage, actors will do eight shows a week for two or three years. A confidence develops. Those that do well end up in the touring company. This shapes the camaraderie of the theater.

“They are all trained together in one likeness,” explains Diana Martinez. “You go audition for a network show and one might have gone to Julliard, one to the Royal Shakespeare, therefore no one works the same way. Here they all come at it with a common language and the same rules. There is lot of respect for their fellow actors.”

Whether or not you were onstage at the same time as a fellow Second City actor, you have gone through the same trenches. At the 50th anniversary, everyone from Tim Meadows, Rachel Dratch, Dan Castellaneta, Nia Vardalos, Harold Ramis, Richard Kind, and George Wendt celebrated together, because they’ve been in the same van, they’ve stayed at that Days Inn, and they’ve earned their stripes.

The type of comedy performed has evolved since the theater set up shop in the 1960s. Back then, casting was based on who was funniest, which meant Alan Arkin, Fred Willard, Barbara Harris, and Robert Klein came onto a bare stage day after day playing to people’s imaginations with just a look. It was a uniraical cast, and women were pigeonholed into playing domestic roles, but it reflected the morays of the culture at the time.

The casting process is much more difficult today than it was forty years ago, because there’s more to be considered than just “funny”. “It’s very important to reflect the community we live in now. It is a more of a global community, and gender equality is very important. We look for people who balance each other out. One might have a very political point of view, where as another might have a humorous physicality,” says Alexander.

One of the major audition exercises in the 1960s and ‘70s was “Three Through the Door”, in which an actor had to come through door three different times as a different character each time. The definition and difference of each character had to

be noted.

“We are building actors, not stand-up comedians per se. We aren’t looking for jokey off-stage. We need smart...very simple,” states Alexander.

“They need to have a point of view. It needs to be unique and original. And when we put them through improvisational exercises they need to be able to make situations funny,” adds Martinez.

In 1973 Second City Toronto opened, and paved the way for John Candy, Gilda Radner, Eugene Levy, and Dan Aykroyd to make comedic history, playing to a healthy amount of America-bashing with Canadian satire. By not just teaching within

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Co-Chairman, CEO & Executive Producer, Second City.*

the confines, Second City has shaped the culture of comedy externally as well. The theater touches on different generations at this point. Think of Belushi and Aykroyd. The newer era includes Stephen Colbert, Steve Carell and Tina Fey.

“You can’t underestimate the influence of Tina Fey, what she stands for; she is becoming an inspiration for another decade of young actor/comedians,” says Alexander.

Every decade since the 1950s has borne the influence of Second City on its television and film. Just about every show that has been nominated for the upcoming comedy awards in Canada includes someone who has been involved with Second City at some point in their career. Women Fully Clothed is a bunch of alums in their late 50s and early 60s that reflect the sentiments of their generation in comedy. They sell out all across the country. And then, of course, there are the hundreds of writers and producers that shape the comedic voices of today.

What can currently be seen in the theater is the impact that resulted from 1995’s monumental revue Piñata Full of Bees. That was where Second City turned the sketch upside down. Prior to that, an actor would come out and set the scene: ‘Hi, I’m





Bill Murray and now we take you to a kitchen...? It was very much akin to stand-up. With Bees, everything got more streamlined. There was more of a thematic arch to the entire show, which was influenced by the Harold type of improvisation, a longer-form variation developed by Del Close. The audience was no longer handed something on a silver platter. It gave them a surprise and a stumbled-upon factor, and with that, humor evolved again.

"It was a very earthquake show for us. It has really influenced everything for us since then. The performers, the Feys and Carells, because they came after that. It made the audience work a little bit more, open up their imagination and ask themselves "Where is this going?" explains Alexander.

Rooted heavily in politics, the troupe started to make its way into pieces exploring other themes. However, there were later revues that still created a dialogue. One such show was *Holy War, Batman!* Or the *Yellow Cab of Courage*, which debuted immediately after 9/11. It dealt very creatively with the many complicated issues that were on people's minds following the attack. The transitional

character was a Middle Eastern cab driver who served as the device that took the audience into the uncomfortable subject matter.

"We opened with this a month after 9/11. I was in the audience one night with one of my dear friends who happens to be a fireman, and he brought in a bunch of his guys from New York and they were just blown away. I was worried about it. I thought,

"They might take this the wrong way'. And they just loved it. It was important because everyone at the time was struggling with how to speak about 9/11 in a smart way. I was so proud that the cast pulled it together and really made it work."

It is the cultural reflection, bringing the topical to life, and in universal terms, that makes a Second City actor the stealth player he or she is. Thinking quickly on their toes, paying attention to the other actors' cues, and reacting to them is what each strives to give to the audience.

What makes Second City different than, say, the New York-based *Groundlings* is that they build characters through a certain truth, a realistic

sensibility rather than through props. It speaks a lot to what Chicago is about. There is a certain kind of earthiness that comes out of the actors in Chicago—even looking at work in dramatic theaters like the Steppenwolf. The influence is widespread and there is a corner on the market of "wit" within the country's "Second City" itself. So established is the reputation that major corporations are clamoring to use the theater's writing chops as well.

Second City Communications has created a series of compliance videos taking a humorous approach to serious workplace issues such as fraud and sexual harassment, as well as marketing and team-building, that do away with the typically mundane presentations.

"It started because companies would call and say 'Hey, we need a comedian for a Christmas party. Then it was "how can we make people pay attention to our ethics policies?' People have to watch them, they have to sign off on them, it is just done in a more humorous approach, similar to *The Office*. Tom York is the genius behind it, and it has really worked well for us," genius Alexander.

Even in the days of networks vs. web channels



like YouTube, Second City is well covered. Second City Network is an online channel that features videos written and developed by the writers and actors themselves. If you don't know "Sassy Gay Friend" then you haven't been online in over a year. As far as more traditional forms of media go, SCTV, which began in 1976, has a strong history in television. Actors were able to be incredibly silly and incredibly smart with their parodies, and the entire show was built on the premise of a fictional television station. It mixed great musical acts with sketch comedy... sound familiar?

Second City currently has about a half-dozen shows in development. Paramount has approached them to do a 2011 version of *Laugh-In*; a half-hour sitcom with Matt Williams, who produced *Roseanne*, is in the works; and there are discussions of a game show/reality hybrid. Also on the horizon is a film based on a book written about Del Close called *Guru* and an hour-long television special with Martin Short.

A third theatre within the Chicago space, called the *Bentwood Lounge*, is soon to open. After a 1.5 million dollar renovation, a cabaret-style 280-seat lounge will exist to showcase more stand-up and

experimental sketch work.

There has always been a rebellious nature behind Second City, both in moving the culture of comedy forward as well as taking strong political and social points of view.

"We are always trying to upend things. Tina Fey's show is more social satire. Steven Colbert's show is more political satire. I can't tell you which future actors are going to be incredibly famous, that all comes down to choices and a lot of luck. But because of our approach, we really have the ability to still speak with an honest voice. It's funny how you turn on the radio and everything sounds the same. Rock and Roll seems to be off everyone's radar. Music does not have a rebellious nature right now," Alexander comments.

There are very few art forms now that are expressing originality. Comedy is still one of them. People are reading more socially-driven works rather than fiction. Music is a mash-up. Movies are remakes. It is the live acts that are giving the younger generation a unique point of view. After all, where else can you parody the President and go down on a burrito all in one night?