

NU's improv groups may cure the winter blues

By ASHA TOULMIN

Want funny at Northwestern? Look no further. These three improv groups — Mee-Ow, The Titanic Players and Out da Box — are putting on shows over the next few weeks, whether they are professional, playful or pushy.

Mee-Ow

A [Mee-Ow](#) show is basically the love child of rock and roll, sketch comedy and short-form improvisation.

“Its non-stop fun,” said James Daniel, a Communication sophomore who’s part of Mee-Ow. “You’re playing with the people on stage and you’re playing with the people in the audience.”

The short-form improv involves comedy games and suggestions from the audience that force the performers into a situation. For example, in the game “World’s Worst,” the cast does impressions of the world’s worst versions of whatever the audience suggests. (Seriously: *Whatever* they suggest.)

“It’s slightly terrifying. You have no idea what’s going to happen. You have to have trust in people,” said co-director Carly Ciarrocchi, a Communication senior. “It creates this really great energy when the audience knows that you’re just making it up as you’re going along.”

Sketch comedy pieces are essentially scenes that the cast write and perform themselves. They look like skits on *Saturday Night Live* or *MAD TV*, a la “[More Cowbell](#)” or “[Dick in a Box](#).”

“We do a lot of group writing because sketches that involve all eight of us tend to be best for us and the audience,” Ciarrocchi said. “We use headlines we read in the newspaper, things we think are funny; we will break off into groups to try to create a sketch based on that.”

Finally, each cast member grabs the mic to sing heartfelt renditions of songs like “[Bossy](#)” and “[All These Things That I’ve Done](#).”

“One of my favorite parts is that it’s interactive. They have suggestions from the audience, then one member will sing a song and they pull people on stage to dance,” said Mee-Ow fan and Communication sophomore Larkin Brown. “It’s that interactive factor that no other performance group has.”

The idea for Mee-Ow started in the 1970s as a musical revue full of parodies and sketch comedy that mocked [Waa-Mu](#), the student-written musical. A few years later, the modern Mee-Ow was born. Some say its the best-known improv group on campus and presents all kinds of topics in comedy.

“We try really hard to cover everything that’s happening in society right now, stuff that’s controversial,” Ciarrocchi said. “We have our fair share of every kind of joke on the table.”

The group has eight members. Unlike the Titanic Players, Mee-Ow usually takes juniors and seniors, although they try to include at least one sophomore so they do not have to completely rebuild after graduation. They are also the only group that does a mainstage show. It premieres in the Louis Room at 8 p.m. on Feb. 28. Other showings are on Feb. 29 and Mar. 1 at 8 p.m. and 11 p.m.

The Titanic Players

“They are on the frontier. They are what’s pushing long-form improv and nobody knows it,” said Mike Abdelsayed, 31, artistic director of [The Titanic Players](#).

Long-form improvisation is what sets Titanic apart at Northwestern and across the nation. This is not just “[Whose Line is it Anyway?](#)” improv formed around games and premeditated situations. In this type of improvisation, the performers have nothing to fall back on except their fellow performers and prepared scenes.

“Long-form is a little harder to explain. Sometimes you have to just see it and it’s hard to get people to see it for the first time but I feel like once people see a Titanic show they are likely to come back,” said Communication junior Jessica McKenna, a member of the Titanic Players and Mee-Ow.

Long-form starts with a suggestion from the audience and from there performers are on their own to create a series of overlapping scenes and characters, lasting about 20-30 minutes. It isn’t always a laughing matter.

“Titanic is open to being not funny all the time,” McKenna said. “We can be improvising a serious scene; we can be improvising a scene that’s based on real people.”

The group was formed in 1994, after Mee-Ow had 200 people try out for 2 spots. It was co-founded by [Second City](#) understudy Abdelsayed, with six people from the fourth floor of Willard Residential College.

Liz Cackowski, who went on to write for *Saturday Night Live*, was a former member whose brother introduced the group to the long-form style.

“Once he had taught a little bit of it, we couldn’t look back. Short-form to us seemed very creatively unsatisfactory. I personally feel long-form is for the benefit of the performer and short-form is for the benefit of the audience,” Abdelsayed said.

Titanic’s other major factor is their size. They total 29 members and have four teams, each one determined by how many years the performers have been in Titanic.

“I think there’s a lot more permanence in Titanic. As a freshman, I’m on Titanic now for four years, and the teams don’t change like Out da Box, who has auditions for the same ensemble every year,” said Communication freshman Aaron Eisenberg, a theatre major. “Titanic teams become more familial. You just get better and better as you further explore your teammates’ styles.”

Auditions for Titanic include a four-year commitment. Typically, they only take freshmen or sophomores into their first-level group, usually called an “incubator.” Once someone drops out of a group, instead of replacing the member, the group dynamic changes and focuses on performance pieces for fewer people.

“A Titanic player that does four years will walk out of this school knowing far more long form improv than any professional out there,” Abdelsayed said.

Thematically anything goes, because it’s up to the performers to create any and all topics.

“Our shows are not intended to make you laugh. They’re not intended to make you cry. They’re intended to make you feel both,” Abdelsayed said. “We are trying to teach you a lesson through comedy.”

Titanic’s next show is Mar. 4 in the McCormick Tribune Forum from 8 to 10 p.m.

Listen to Titanic member Aaron Eisenberg tell a funny story:

Out da Box

“We like to think of ourselves as equal opportunity offenders,” said Chris Lyons, producer for Out da Box. “You know we go for any and everybody. Nobody here on campus really has no-holds-barred comedy like that.”

Out da Box, sponsored by the [African American Theater Ensemble \(AATE\)](#), originated in the 1970s after the black community wanted something different than the serious, emotional theater of the time. Ever since the group has developed into what Communication sophomore Rebecca Loeser depicts as the “bad older sibling” in the metaphorical family tree of Northwestern improv troupes.

“A lot of it is humor that deals with culture and cultural differences, and it deals with issues like racism and skin color and differences like that,” Loeser said. “I think that’s a really good thing about it, by making jokes about it, and by making jokes that on the surface are raunchy and offensive, you really think about it.”

Jokes like ones from last year that focused on Hurricane Katrina or a Mexican KKK member are perhaps one reason why director Toccara Baker describes the nine-person group as “outrageous.”

“A lot of the crowd is drunk half the time too. People just come expecting to hear outrageous funniness,” Baker, a Communication senior, said.

Fifteen people auditioned for Out da Box this year. Because AATE sponsors it, most of the members come from different ethnic backgrounds, with Loeser being the only Caucasian. Out da Box also bases a lot of its performance around racial issues, and puts on a show as part of Black History Month.

“You know it’s not spoken of in the same light as Mee-Ow or Titanic because Out da Box its run by African American Theater Ensemble so we don’t get the same type of publicity that the other groups do,” Lyons, a Communication sophomore, said. “But at the end of the day we do sell, we

sell out all our shows. So people know what they are going to get from Out da Box. I'm hoping by the time I graduate that we can gain a lot more publicity, but I feel like the respect is already there."

Ultimately, Out da Box does teach through acting, no matter how rowdy and rambunctious it is.

"The comedy in the show is really natural. It's the kind of comedy that you laugh at it because you know you've seen ignorant stuff like that in the real world," Lyons said.

The next performances for Out da Box are Feb. 21 to Feb. 23 in Shanley Pavilion, at 8 p.m. and 11 p.m.

Listen to Out da Box member and Mee-Ow producer Zora Senat tell a funny story: