

Super Troupers

The Improprofessionals @ Café de Paris, 23/01/08

On the very hip and trendy rue Oberkampf in the heart of the Ménilmontant *quartier*, the Café de Paris sits amongst many brasseries and bars that are perhaps more eye-catching or more inviting, boasting great happy-hour prices or enticing people in with themed interiors. However this little joint, despite its generic name, tonight played host to a very non-generic troupe

of entertainers: The Improprofessionals.

For their first performance of 2008, entitled *Totally News*, the cast of five comedians of varying nationalities presented a current-affairs-themed show in which we “tuned in” to the INN, the Improprofessionals News Network. Audience participation was mandatory, and the crowd’s random suggestions for themes and topics certainly made for some interesting “interviews” on

the INN show, with subjects ranging from purple turtles, discombobulation and Fashion Week.

Although the show was mostly in English, there was a fair amount of *franglais* used in the performance (including Canadian Clara’s use of “*débarrass...ing*”), and inspiration for many of the sketches was pulled from recent French magazines and newspapers. The “Regional News” section of the programme called for audience members to read out the first words they saw on any random page of various French glossies strewn around the room. Spotted in *Choc* magazine, the words “il y a cinq ans” became the inspiration for three coinciding eyewitness reports of some disturbing campsite goings-on in the south of France five years ago... “Une hausse de 3%” encouraged a sketch about a professor’s electrifying invention which improved a light-switch designer’s brain capacity by 3%, transforming him into the greatest innovator the world has seen, and “triste fin” translated into the sad ending of a dying man’s last words on a trip to the opera with his estranged wife after years of loneliness and isolation in a nursing home.

Totally News was not in fact *totally* news; there were other features of the show that made it a well-rounded, not to mention hilarious, exploration of the media. After the science-fiction-style weather report came the sports review: the World Ironing Championship, live from



Photos courtesy of improprofessionals.com

Helsinki. Who knew that slow-motion ironing could be so exciting? As the commentator animatedly described the astonishing precision of “Helen” from the USA’s pleat-ironing and trouser-leg flipping versus “Svenson” from Sweden’s brilliant handling of obstacles such as the back-pocket trick, I was on the edge of my seat, wondering who would win this intense dead heat, and making a mental note to check out the bizarre yet very real sport of Extreme Ironing when I got home. It’s a real sport, you know, go and look it up on Wikipedia.

“Art Forum” was the part of the programme that invited ‘Dario’ from the audience to be a modern Michaelangelo as he ‘sculpted’ four of the comedy crew into various statuesque positions and then named his masterpiece “The Kidnapping”. The “Culinary Corner” requested a recipe idea from the audience. After trying to think of the least appetising thing possible, I called out “rollmops” from my front row seat. My friends around me - as well as the rest of the audience, most likely - all exchanged looks of confusion. Eventually, after finding an actor amongst them who actually knew what roll mops were (unsurprisingly, the yellow-clad Scandinavian stepped forward), the show continued. However, this was no ordinary cooking demonstration: Caspar’s arms, neatly held behind his back, were being replaced by those of Mark, standing behind him, and so, as Caspar described how he would marinate the fillet, Mark provided appropriate arm gestures - slightly resembling the flailing limbs of TeckTonik enthusiasts.

The show was rounded off with a take on *Nouvelle Star*. Not content with just one random

contribution to the show, I ventured a name for this latest pop sensation: Spoon Tray. Unfortunately, I cannot take full credit for this bizarre appellation, derived from a very random conversation whilst out to dinner with friends back in September. How we got there, I don’t recall, but I do remember us saying that “Spoon Tray would be a very cool name for a band”. And so, thanks to the joy that is audience participation, our dream was realised. Spoon Tray (misheard as ‘Spoon Train’ by one of the troupe) provided a fantastic finish to a wonderful evening with their ‘hit single’ *Carpet Riding*, the name of which, you guessed it, was another audience suggestion. Considering it was improvised, the song was actually pretty good (“*I’m on a carpet ride, all the houses look so small / From my carpet ride, never thought that I could fall*”); I’d certainly buy it off iTunes, anyway.

Other highlights of the performance included a commercial break for *Pillowman!*, whose comfortable rump beneath your cranium ensures you’ll never miss a good night’s sleep again, and a debate on how peanut butter thieves in a college co-op should be spared the death penalty.

As well as being international ambassadors for off-the-cuff comedy, The Improprofessionals are also very nice people indeed. After the show, Flo the German came to sit at our table and we had a good ol’ chat. He even



On stage: Mark Jane and Clara McBride

Photo: Tom Tollenaere

learnt our names by way of word-association; obviously a Woody Allen fan, Flo remembered me as *Annie Hall*. Perhaps he enjoys boating, too, as he made oar movements in order not to forget our dear Ro.

A thoroughly amusing and original night out, The Improprofessionals is a must for any expat in Paris. The sheer unpredictability of this type of comedy night is certainly something very special. Indeed, the whole concept of improvisational comedy is a rather surreal experience; like a very public game of *Le Cadavre Exquis*, it delves into the subconscious of both cast and audience and leaves you thinking, “Where the hell did rollmops come from?”. To borrow a line from that great philosopher Forrest Gump, any performance of The Improprofessionals is “like a box of chocolates; you never know what you’re gonna get”. But after having had a taste, I can promise you that what you’re gonna get is definitely worth it.

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The Improprofessionals perform fortnightly; check out *Totally News* on February 6th at Café de Paris, or *ImproFlicks* on February 20th on the Péniche Antipode. For more details on The Improprofessionals and their next shows, as well as information on classes and workshops, visit their website: <http://www.improfessionals.com>