

Improv Review

Vive l'Impro!

by Linda Healey

show reviewed February 15, 2002

For English-speakers living in Paris, for whom daily life can often seem like one long series of wildly varying improvisations, the emergence of the Improprofessionals troupe has been a welcome perk. Formed in 2001, the troupe includes seven members of five nationalities and performs in both English and French. Its German founder, Florian Bartsch, is dean of the Académie du théâtre sans sens et sans chaussettes (Academy of Senseless and Sockless Theater) in Paris and a teacher of improv in three languages.

In March 2001, Mr. Bartsch teamed up with the English actors Helen Connolly and Mark Jane, Caspar Schjelbred of Denmark and the American Timothy Lone, artistic director of the Improprofessionals and teacher of beginning and advanced improv at the ATSSC, to form the troupe. Three other founding members have since moved on, replaced in July 2001 by Diane Bertrand of England and the Canadian Clara McBride, who teaches beginning improv in French at the ATSSC.



From L to R: Clara McBride, Mark Jane, Tim Lone, Caspar Schjelbred, Diane Bertrand, Florian Bartsch and Helen Connolly.

troupe made a strong entrance, easily overcoming the slight impediment of the old-fashioned grade school-style raised stage and establishing rapport with the audience. Mr. Bartsch

The Improprofessionals

★★★ out of 5

Starring Clara McBride, Mark Jane, Tim Lone, Caspar Schjelbred, Diane Bertrand, Florian Bartsch and Helen Connolly. Mark Jane on guitar. Directed by: Timothy Lone. American Church at 65, quai d'Orsay, 75007 Paris (in a different location each month) Monthly, but in a different location each time. 7 Euros
Information: improfessionals@yahoo.fr

Since last year, the troupe has performed in a range of venues in Paris, from Café Oz in Pigalle, passing through Canada House and German House at Cité Universitaire, to the theater of the American Church in the staid 7th arrondissement. They are primarily players of short-form improv, mixing games, scenes and audience participation, and carrying the show themselves, without benefit of sound, lights or music (save a guitar).

Their "St. Valentine Show" drew an audience of 120, many of them repeat spectators for what has become a monthly performance schedule. The

warmed up the spectators with practice cheers and boos, performed some discreet market research by having various crowd members identify their nationalities (the French well-represented in the audience) and set the tone of focused enthusiasm. During the warm-up games, Machine and Freeze Tag, the troupe came across as very "on" with high-energy and careful attention given to explaining the games.

The scenes that followed - Faulty Product, What If ("...I were an egg," in this case) and Word at a Time Expert (using an audience member as the third "head") - were workmanlike with a few pleasing touches, such as Mr. Jane's fluff of naming the object in the first scene, nicely rescued by his fully committing to the mistake. Mr. Lone provided some skillful driving in What If, with Ms. McBride showing equal skill as a passenger. The audience volunteer added a satisfyingly game element to the Expert (and was rewarded with a bouquet of flowers, as were all the audience participants).

The show was interspersed with 60-second monologues based on words provided by the audience. These revealed all the challenges of the short-form, as players typically still groped for conflict at the 45-second mark and were hard-pressed to resolve their story within the final five-second countdown. Mr. Jane, who throughout the show displayed an engaging willingness to dive into the deep end, was probably the most successful at creating character, conflict, humor and resolution within the 60-second format.

Other scenes included a Slide Show, narrated by Mr. Lone with some expressive and inventive poses by the other players, as well as improvised songs, one performed as a duet and two done in line-by-line sequence by all the players. These games, while watchable, failed to take off in spite of the players' best efforts. Paper Quotes provided a successful platform for scene building by Mr. Jane and Mr. Schjelbred, while the Scene From Nothing carried by Mr. Schjelbred and Mr. Lone unfortunately ended at roughly the same destination as it had started.

Appropriately for the occasion, one of the last scenes was First Date sketch with material provided by a couple in the audience. Mr. Jane and Ms. McBride played the high-school couple as comic and straight man, with Ms. Bertrand appearing as a bafflingly British waitress in a Minnesota restaurant.

Technique was generally good and goodwill palpable; nonetheless the show as a whole had a slight air of effort uncharacteristic of this troupe, whose giddy commitment, rather than safe "performance," has enabled it to draw a steadily increasing audience in Paris. While some players have a tendency to disguise themselves in broad accents or physical impediments not clearly linked to character or story, others are more willing to dig down deep and reveal their common humanity, with all the emotion, humor and narrative potential this entails. As a group, the Improprofessionals have a cohesive dynamic; they play well together as well as hold their own as individual players. The "St. Valentine Show," with its emphasis on one- and two-player scenes, was perhaps a less fitting showcase for this group's interactive skills.

Linda Healey is a beginning student of improv at the Académie du théâtre sans sens et sans chaussettes in Paris as well as a poet, fiction writer, journalist and editor.