

# Improv, improving

By Mary Catharine Martin | CAPITAL CITY WEEKLY

It's surprising how quickly a pair of ping pong balls can turn a hand into a face.

Performers at the second Alaska State Improv Festival, a gathering focused on "unscripted theater" and hosted by local group Morally Improv-erished, wasted no time transforming those faces into characters with emotions. Fright. Frustration. Excitement. Curiosity.

Imbued with the right mannerisms and voices, ping pong balls resting on a hand can turn pretty expressive, even if they're just counting from one to 10.

Puppeteer and improv performer Sam Locke, of Underhanded Improv, came to Juneau from Chicago to open the four-day improvisational comedy festival.

Puppets offer different opportunities for invention, he said, calling a puppet "a costume for your arm."

He likes scenes in which puppets interact with humans.

"You could be doing a scene set at a prom, but the prom date is an alien who just talks gibberish. ... A good improviser will never try to justify why this alien is on stage," he said as he held up a hand holding an insect-eyed gray alien.

"They'll just go with it."

Transformation is central to puppeteering, and to improv itself. Unlike stand-up comedy, which involves one or more comedians going on stage and telling scripted jokes, improv asks comedians to make up their jokes on the spot.

That requires constant change and evolution, Locke said, and puppets are one way to make that change.

"Puppets are naturally a better visual medium," Locke said. "You can do things you couldn't get away with in a regular improv scene."

Part of that, he said, is darkness: an audience might be more willing to accept dark jokes that come from a purple puppet made of felt. Many people still assume a show with puppets must be meant for children - a definite misconception. In a two-hour workshop April 25, puppets were tourists, mountaineers, needle-prone nurses and mystics, all in situations adults would find funny.

What about the downsides?

"It's one of the most uncomfortable art forms there is," Locke said. "Like with athletes, there's a life expectancy with puppeteers."

Hold your arm out, elbow up at a 90-degree angle for half an hour, and you'll see what he means.

The workshops at the Alaska State Improv Festival (nicknamed AS IF!?) change from year to year, said organizer Eric Caldwell, who is director, producer, and a performer for Morally Improv-erished. This year, Amber Nash, the voice of Pam Poovey in the TV show "Archer!" came to Juneau, as did Matt Horgan, Susan Messing, and other performers from across the country.

"We decide upon the workshops based upon needs of statewide improve community and skills of instructors coming into town," he said.

Caldwell wears a lot of hats in the Juneau improv community. He said other people will be taking over some of his responsibilities soon. He plans to start classes in Juneau, perhaps in the fall, so more people have an opportunity to try improv humor at an introductory level.

"We (Morally Improv-erished) are getting a reputation within the larger improv community. We would like to continue to build that while at same time having opportunity to build the local improv community," he said.

"I've been doing improv for 14 years, and I'm looking for a way to branch out into new material," said Jason Martin, who visited Juneau with five other members of the Anchorage group Scared Scriptless Improv. "Improv is always about being fresh and finding something new. Any new format we can explore will give us more fodder and more things to play with."



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Mary Jo Mrochinski, front, interprets her insta-puppet's feelings while walking to music. Behind her are Jason Martin, left, and Eric Caldwell.