

Improv-ing with age

ComedyCity – 35 years in the making

By William Kopp
Contributing Writer

ComedyCity, a beloved improv comedy troupe in the heart of De Pere, recently celebrated its 35th anniversary.

The comedy troupe was established in 1987 by Betty Butcher under the name ComedySportz at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh.

Shortly after, the troupe found themselves moving further north to De Pere in search of a bigger venue, eventually finding themselves under their current name of ComedyCity and in their current location on 365 Main Ave. in early 2018.

Since moving to De Pere the troupe has seen many new faces, from its Creative Director Nick Wallander who has been around for 12 years, to its current theatre Co-Owner Chad Nehring who has been part of the troupe for 8 years.

“I started out as just an audience member coming to shows and thinking

back to those times people said ‘hey, you’re kind of funny, you should do comedy,’” Wallander said. “So I waited and saw they had auditions, tried, did not make the cut. I came back six months later, tried and made the cut.”

Nehring found his experience to be quite similar as well.

“I came to a couple of shows and an audition came up and I went to that along with 10 or 12 other people that were there,” he said. “I’m not a theatre person, no background in that. I kind of did it on a lark and eight years later, you know, here I am, owning the venue portion of the operation. It’s kind of one of those ‘the rest is history’ sort of things.”

New troupe members go through almost six months of training prior to being put in their first show, including Nehring and Wallander.

Most of the “players” as the troupe likes to call them, end up at ComedyCity with no formal theater experience — all ages, all



▲ When ComedyCity got its start back in 1987, the troupe went by the name ComedySportz and was located at UW-Oshkosh.



▲ ComedyCity's venue, located at 365 Main Ave. in De Pere, offers ample opportunities for people in the community to come and enjoy live entertainment.



▲ Creative Director Nick Wallander and ComedyCity Co-Owner Chad Nehring view themselves as the “current occupants” of the history of ComedyCity. William Kopp photos

was at their fingertips,” Wallander said. “It took them a while to come back out of that routine and get them to trust live entertainment again. It’s crazy how much is out there. That’s a whole new element. I know we’ve gotten used to figuring out how to deal with that, but when literally any night people could just be like, ‘Do I want to put in the effort of going out right now when I could just get the brand new movie on my TV right now?’ It’s a process.”

The troupe offers a multitude of services, from their normal adult shows at night on weekends, family-friendly shows on Saturday evenings, private parties and even corporate workshops and improv training.

“We take the core elements of our elders and incorporate them,” Nehring said, talking about their corporate improv training. “Sometimes people will be like ‘Oh, you’re going to make me try to be funny.’ No, but what we’re going to do is use some of the things that we’ve learned here and take that back and apply that in your workplace so you can understand how to listen better, communicate better and work with people a little better.”

Future goals

The troupe and its members look forward to the future with plenty of hopes and goals.

“I think our primary goal right now is just to continue to get more people in the theater scene, our shows or even just supporting local theater and arts in general,” Wallander said. “I think first and foremost is getting people here who maybe haven’t been here in 20 years and need to get reacquainted, or getting people here who just haven’t been here before.”

Nehring also added, “We’re a small part of what is really a large arts community around the Green Bay Metro. But, what we really want is for people to dip their toes into the water a little bit if you will, and get up here in the venue. It’s one of the newest buildings on the block and we’re 100+ years old.”

While this remains their main goal, the troupe seeks a further goal that isn’t so easily tracked.

“We want to give the people who show up the most unique experience that they’ve had at a live performance,” Wallander remarked. “They decided to show up so we appreciate that — we want to make them feel appreciated. We want them to become part of the show with their suggestions, but we also want them to feel like they may never have seen something like this if they didn’t show up.”

walks of life, no experience required.

“Even Mike (Eserkain) who’s owned the ComedyCity troupe element since the early 2000s was never a theater guy,” Wallander said. “He was, I think, an English major. But he saw auditions when he was in college over at St. Norbert and came over and became part of ComedySports and he eventually transitioned into owning it. It wasn’t ever anything on his agenda. Some people just fall into this and they love it and they continue doing it.”

Wallander and Nehring are relative newbies to the troupe, where some members of the troupe have been around for 20 plus years. There’s 350 alumni that have been part of the troupe at one point or another, and so the two just consider themselves to be “current occupants” of the grand history of ComedyCity.

Major events of the distant past

COVID-19 has affected every single local business throughout the last few years.

From some going out of business, to others going completely online and some even developing restrictions to keep things in-house.

The ComedyCity troupe found themselves enduring the pandemic as well.

They were hit with financial issues that were helped by various government agencies and their courteous landlord; they hosted online shows for those still seeking out their entertainment; and they struggled with the issue of staying relevant.

From the various streaming websites presented online to the multitude of movies and tv shows to watch in theaters or at home, there’s entertainment everywhere, at the push of a button, and that presents issues for live entertainment.

“The COVID-related lockdown and quarantines and stuff really allowed people to discover how much entertainment

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THE NEXT GENERATION IN THEATER

Bella Frank Bay Port High School

Parents: Lesli and Steve Frank
Area of Interest: Theater

When did you first get involved in theater?

I started performing when I was three. I was in dance from ages three to 13. When I was in seventh grade, I started exploring musical theater. I wanted to find a new passion, because I have bad knees and dancing on them was wearing them down more. I started doing musicals in seventh grade and fell in love. Being a part of theater was the only thing that made me as happy as when I was dancing, and I wasn't able to do that anymore, so finding a love for theater was refreshing and an exciting new adventure.

What do you like most about theater?

Theater gives me a space to escape from life for a little while. I'm able to become someone else for a couple of hours. I've had so many amazing opportunities through theater and I have met some of my closest friends. I love getting to do something that has such an incredible community surrounding it.

What has been your favorite experience related to theater so far?

My favorite theater experience would be the last musical I was in at my high school, we performed *Beauty and the Beast*. Being involved in any show in any capacity has always been exciting for me. That production was definitely one of my favorites to perform so far. Another favorite would be participating in the Next Stage program through St. Norbert College. The people who are involved in that program are so talented and being able to work with them was such a great, professional, inspiring and educational experience.

What's something you hope to accomplish as a performer in the future?

I'm hoping to earn a Bachelor of Fine Arts in musical theater as well as a degree in education. I'd love to be able to pursue musical theater as a career. In that, I'd also hope to have a positive impact on the community and the people I'm able to work with.

What advice would you give to someone looking to get into theater?

If it is something you love to do, go for it. You never know what can or can't happen if you don't try. Theater is a beautiful thing and also has a very supportive community. Be kind to the people around you, because people enjoy working with people who are kind.

What six words would you use to describe yourself?

Organized, kind, passionate, helpful, caring and supportive.

What subject do you enjoy most in school?

I enjoy my music classes, choir and orchestra, but I also enjoy language arts classes.

What's your biggest pet peeve?

People who walk slow when I'm in a rush.



Where do you hope to travel one day?

I'd love to travel to New York, just to see the city, but I'd also love to travel anywhere warm and with a beach.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given?

My dad telling me to do what I love, no matter what it is. If it's your passion, don't hold back.

Who is your role model?

My mom. She is probably one of the strongest people I know and she has always supported me with what I want to do.

What plans do you have for after you've finished school?

I'm hoping to double major in education and get a Bachelor of Fine Arts in musical theater.

Do you have any pets?

I have a sheepadoodle dog named Hamilton and a cat named Finnick.

What's one skill you think everyone should have?

Kindness. Something as small as a "thank you" can make all the difference. People enjoy being around other people who are kind.

Are you a Green Bay Packers fan?

Yes — just more of a fan when they're having a good season. **CP**

Favorites

Song: "Anything" by Taylor Swift

Book: *The Selection* series by Kiera Cass

Show: *Gilmore Girls*

Movie: *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*

Color: Sage green

Season: Late spring/early summer

Time of day: Sunset

Snack: Pretzels

ARTIST ANGLE

QA



Medium/Art Form
Visual

with BONNIE BOHN



When and how did you start making art?

Art has always been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. As a child I would spend hours sketching pictures for my made-up stories.

I have a need to create — it's my escapism and meditation time.

What inspires your work?

My inspirations for my artwork come from many places. My abstracts come from my own feelings about things — internal and external.

Other artists always inspire me. I'm always taking some type of art class and find more inspiration from my classmates than I do from the instructor.

I am also inspired by the beauty of nature, particularly birds and flowers. I am very inspired by colors and moods as they influence each other.

How would you describe Green Bay/NE Wisconsin's arts community?

After being away from this area for twenty years, I am pleasantly surprised by the growth of the art community in this area.

What is the best advice you have for other artists?

Know when to STOP!

Where can people find your work?

You can find my work at The Art Garage in Green Bay, and my original collaged greeting cards in their gift shop.

My work is also shown at The Alliance for the Arts in Fort Myers, Florida. **CP**

Artist Angle is presented in partnership with The Art Garage, a Green Bay nonprofit arts organization whose mission is to encourage an appreciation for and participation in the visual, performing and literary arts. Learn more about The Art Garage at www.theartgarage.org.

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The current venue seats 70 — with a bar for guests over 21 — and the shape is more conducive to a theater environment than their previous venues.

The troupe provides new and exciting feature shows as the ideas come, from their newest idea of Hallmark Christmas movies, to creating fictional stories lasting

80 minutes to musical comedies.

As Nehring puts it, "It's like a new little bottle of magic that comes out every show. It gets opened and distributed and then it gets bottled back up and a new bottle starts the next show."

For those interested in seeing shows and experiencing that magic, you can visit their website for tickets at comedycity.net. **CP**