

Life

Off The Cuff

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Victoria Charters often wears a black T-shirt with the saying, "Scripts are for sissies."

An improv enthusiast for 10 years, she is part of the "Caught in the Act" troupe that performs around town.

The Santa Barbara Improv Group creates a sport of unscripted acts

It's a disparate group that gathers every Wednesday evening at the Unitarian Society at Santa Barbara and Arrellaga streets.

There's the driving instructor, engineer, administrative assistant, psychotherapist, actress and writer, photographer's assistant, business analyst, junior high teacher, children's book illustrator and a grandmother of four and former skater in the Ice Follies and Holiday on Ice.

Their leader, Alan Irwin, a serious software nerd by day, sheds his self-described "classic geek" persona and becomes the completely uninhibited, hilarious and energetic director as he puts Santa Barbara Improv Group members through their paces.

Among them is actress and writer Victoria Charters, who wears a black T-shirt proclaiming what could be the group's motto -- "Scripts are for sissies."

The action-packed sessions aren't for sissies, either. They run from 7:30 to 10 p.m., and there are no breaks.

"I like to keep the momentum going," said Mr. Irwin. "I'm exhausted at the end of class, but I like the level of energy. When someone comes for the first time, I encourage them to participate but tell them they can say 'no' anytime."

Few refuse, mainly because they are having too much fun with warm-up exercises like "Whoosh! Bang! Pow!" where participants stand in a circle and each sweeps his or her arms sideways for "Whoosh," puts both hands up with palms outward for "Bang" and "Pows" someone else with a point of the finger.

Giggles began to fill the stark room as participants, still standing in the circle, create a story, each contributing a single word.

By the time they get to the "Three-Person Mutant" exercise, they are laughing hysterically, especially the three women who pretend to be losing their bathing suits on a water slide or the three "bridesmaids" comparing notes on their god-awful dresses and weddings in general.



It's the laughter -- good, hard bellyLaughs -- that addicted Barbara Kleemann to the improv group, which she discovered two years ago.

"I wanted to laugh hard all the time. It fulfills a great need for me. I love to do ridiculous things to make people laugh. Before 9/11, I wore an Easter Bunny suit on the airplane when I went to see my grandchildren in Point Roberts, Wash. Another time, I wore a Superman cape because my grandson was into Superman," said Mrs. Kleeman, who will be 73 on Wednesday.

A professional ice skater before her marriage, Mrs. Kleemann, the mother of four children, kept busy with volunteer work and Adult Education classes after moving with her husband to Santa Barbara 22 years ago.

She was looking for a new challenge when she saw a notice in a newspaper about the improv group. She attended a session and loved it immediately, she said.

Mrs. Kleeman said she makes annual trips to New York City to watch improv performances.

"I always make sure to sit on the aisle so when they need someone from the audience, I jump up right away," she said. "I like the challenge, and it's good to keep the mind stimulated at all ages. It's better than crossword puzzles."

Allegra Stahl, an administrative assistant, was inspired to join the class "by avoidance."

"My neighbors had recently formed a sadly off-tempo rock band that rehearsed on Wednesday nights. I was looking for an excuse to be out of the house. Fortunately, after the first class, I was hooked and found it a low-pressure way to enjoy acting. What keeps me coming back is basically the weekly belly laughs."

She also likes the "feeling of camaraderie and teamwork" in improv performances.

"Improvisation requires all of the actors to support each other while they are on stage. If one person bombs, another steps in to save the situation," said Ms. Stahl.



Laughing their way through one of the exercises at the Santa Barbara Improv Group's weekly session are actress Victoria Charters, at left, Mike Gordon, an illustrator for children's books, and Barbara Kleemann, grandmother and former professional ice skater. They are among the diverse group that Alan Irwin puts through their paces every Wednesday evening at the Unitarian Society.

The dichotomy between Mr. Irwin's day job as a computer engineer for Santa Barbara Infrared and his zany antics as leader of the improv group is exactly what appeals to him most.

"It's a complete release -- a way for adults to learn how to play with each other and get rid of the 'schluff' of the day. By the second or third exercise, you should have forgotten everything else," he said.

With his long graying hair in a ponytail, his beard and moustache, the 49-year-old Mr. Irwin is a holdover from the 1960s, for which he makes no apology. His wardrobe seldom varies -- well-worn jeans, Birkenstocks and neutral-colored shirts, mostly gray.

There's nothing neutral about the gold filling in his front tooth, however.

"I broke my tooth when I was 15 and was supposed to have a porcelain filling over the gold. Somehow, I never got around to it -- just lazy. Now people know me by the tooth," he said, grinning widely.

Stressing that improvisation is not stand-up comedy, Mr. Irwin said the skills are very different.



Alan Irwin is a serious software nerd by day, but at night, he sheds his "classic geek" persona and becomes the zany leader of the Santa Barbara Improv Group. Everyone is encouraged to participate in the action-packed sessions that last 2 1/2 hours with no breaks. "I like to keep the momentum going," said Mr. Irwin, who has taught the Wednesday night group for 10 years.



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Mr. Irwin tells his students.

"Improv is a group skill. You can't do it alone. You need people to work with. Its core is the human relationship between characters. The best homework is to watch how people interact," he said.

A UCSB graduate with bachelor's degrees in biochemistry and physics, Mr. Irwin became intrigued with improv when he went to a performance of Cahoots at the Alhecama Theatre in 1989.

He loved it but was "too afraid to go to the class," which was then taught by Matt Ingersol, Mr. Irwin recalled. A friend persuaded him to go, and then he began attending on his own. In those days, he said, they met at the Culinary Alliance Hall across from the Greyhound bus station.

Ten years ago, Mr. Irwin took over as leader of the Wednesday sessions, which meet all year long. The only time the class is canceled is for Christmas or New Year's or if there aren't enough people. Five is the minimum, and most classes average eight to 10. The fee is \$5 a session to pay for rental of the room.

The length of time participants attend the classes varies. There is no set schedule.

"I find the new ones come about three times and then either stay or drop out. They have a very good time at the beginning and then realize it's more work than they planned," he said.

One couple came to the group at the suggestion of their marriage counselor.

"He wanted them to learn how to be more spontaneous. They lasted one session. I guess they were in counseling for a good reason," said Mr. Irwin with a chuckle.

Four stalwarts have been in the class for 10 years -- Jim McRobie, a driving instructor; Victoria Charters, actress and writer; Andrew De Vore, photographer's assistant; and Mike Gordon, children's book illustrator.

Along with Mr. Irwin, the group, named Caught in the Act, performs at various locations around town.

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