

# Holiday humor

Improv troupes take  
the stage at LMC's  
Hanson Theatre

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**

HP Features Writer

**BENTON HARBOR** — Dann Sytsma's Crawlspace Eviction comedy troupe has built its reputation on relationship-based improv.

So, it's not surprising when he and his wife, Tara Sytsma, share the stage together that a bit of real life sneaks into their act.

"There's so much humor in relationships," Dann Sytsma says by telephone from Kalamazoo. "Sometimes we need to laugh about things we may have thought were really serious at the time. We have a 4-year-old boy and a 20-month-old girl. Our 4-year-old son is always coming up with crazy (stuff). Just the way that he talks and behaves is so funny and kind of quirky and weird, which we fully expect. So sometimes on stage we will say things the way he says them, which are jokes only she and I would know, but it makes each other laugh."

When the Sytsmas and fellow Crawlspace Eviction members Bannon Backhus, Brian Lam and Brian Duguay perform Friday along with the Benton Harbor-based TORP Improvisational Comedy troupe during "The Ha! Ha! Holidays Show" at Lake Michigan College's Hanson Theatre, they'll be doing a lot more than making each other laugh.

Since 2003, Crawlspace Eviction has been delivering not only laughs, but chortles and guffaws for a

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## IMPROV

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blend of short- and long-form improv comedy. The company began as a comedy team that performed periodically and was affiliated with Whole Art Theatre in Kalamazoo. As a way to showcase not only their talent but that of other comedy teams, Sytsma has since started the Kalamazoo Improv Festival.

“We’ve been around about 12 years now, and we’ve always had a focus on relationship-based improv,” Sytsma says. “Most of the games we’ve chosen have a real strong relationship element to them. Kalamazoo is such a theater town, and to maintain a proximity to scripted theater we decided to set improv with characters you get to know a little more, instead of quick laughs and quick gags. But it’s still tons of fun.”

For Friday’s “The Ha! Ha! Holidays Show,” that means using families and other ties to create uncomfortable but hilarious improv moments all centered around the holidays.

“Themed shows are always fun because the suggestions you get from the audience are all based on that single theme,” Sytsma says. “We always try to push ourselves in the ways we get suggestions from the audience. In a show like this that means asking for a place you wouldn’t want to spend the holidays in, or the place you might bump into your creepy uncle. Or if they set us in the North Pole, how do we set a scene that’s not obvious, to play with Christmas in a way you haven’t seen people do before. We try to get more creative so that’s always fun.”

Opening Friday’s show is TORP Improvisational Comedy, the troupe founded four years ago by Mike Nadolski, who not only owns The Oak Room at The Citadel for which The Oak Room Players take its name, but is the director of LMC’s Mendel Center Mainstage and Hanson Theater. “The Ha! Ha! Holidays Show” kicks off the first-year Living Room Series in the Hanson, which will bring acts better suited for the college’s 250-seat venue.

“The idea is to provide a space for acts that are more fun to watch up close so you can have a little more of a party atmosphere,” Nadolski says. “We’re kicking it off with improv, but we also will have music as part of this series. This is an idea to get acts in there that the next



Photos provided

**Crowspace Eviction, the Kalamazoo-based improv troupe of, from left, Tara Sytsma, Bannon Backhus, Brian Lam, Brian Duguay and Dann Sytsma, perform Friday as part of “The Ha! Ha! Holidays Show” at Lake Michigan College’s Hanson Theatre.**



**TORP Improvisational Comedy, featuring, from left, Beth Sekellick, Mike Nadolski, Andy Sawyer, Tony Balbo and Sarah Spoonholtz, perform Friday as part of the “The Ha! Ha! Holidays Show” at Lake Michigan College’s Hanson Theatre.**

generation of season subscribers to the mainstage will want to see.”

Along with Nadolski, TORP’s Andy Sawyer, Patricia Muellen, Joel Smeindorf, Sarah Spoonholtz, Tony Balbo, Beth Sekellick and others will perform a series of improv games based on audience suggestions.

“We have five or six games we’ll be doing,” Nadolski says. “It’s all going to be around the holidays and this time of year. We might do a peak in on Santa Claus and what he’s up to. We have this

ability with imagination to look into a remote corner of Santa’s workshop. There might be a visit from Dr. Know-It-All – he’s so smart that he’s had to divide his brain into multiple bodies.” Guest comedian Dirk Handlin also will do a short stand-up set before Crowspace Eviction takes the stage. When asked if the two improv troupes will perform any scenes together, Nadolski adds, “It’s improv so you never know what’s going to happen,” he says. “We’re interested in having as much fun as the audience.”

With a 4-year-old and a 20-month-old at home, the definition of fun is more loosely defined now for the Sytsmas.

“My wife, Tara, is one of the best improvisers I’ve worked with over the years,” Dann Sytsma says. “So it’s always fun to be able to work together. Of course now it’s just great to have an excuse to get a babysitter.”

Contact: jbonfiglio@TheHP.com, 932-0364, Twitter: @HPBonfiglio



## IF YOU GO

**What:** "The Ha! Ha! Holidays Show – A Comedy Extravaganza" featuring Crawlspace Eviction and TORP improv groups

**When:** 7 p.m. Friday

**Where:** Hanson Theatre, Lake Michigan College Mendel Center, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

**How much:** \$15, \$10 students and seniors

**Contact:** 927-1221 or [www.lmcmainstage.org](http://www.lmcmainstage.org)

**Artist info:** [www.crawlspace theatre.com](http://www.crawlspace theatre.com);  
[www.torpfunny.com](http://www.torpfunny.com)

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