

The Second City brings impro

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO
Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — With a name like “The Second City Hits Home,” it’s easy to speculate about a few of the names that might be dropped when the famous Chicago-based improv and sketch comedy company brings its latest show to the Twin Cities.

After all, this corner of Michigan has been home to everyone from Sports Illustrated swimsuit model Kate Upton to comedian Sinbad; “Ghostbusters” actor Ernie Hudson to professional wrestler Bobo Brazil.

When asked for a hint at what the audience might hear when the show makes a tour stop Saturday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, Second City cast member Jeffrey Murdoch remained vague on specifics.

“Oh, I’m afraid that’s top secret right now,” Murdoch says by phone from Chicago. “I can tell you that it will be a mixture of improv and sketch comedy. We have a writer’s room here at Second City so they will do a lot of research about Benton Harbor or whatever city or region we go to and write some of the scenes that are based on detailed events or local celebrities or popular places and stuff like that. But then, as a cast, we also do some improv, and pepper in some of the things we have learned about the area as well.”

Murdoch, and fellow Second City “GreenCo.” members Emily Fightmaster, Ryan Asher, Laurel Krabacher and Carley Moseley as well as understudy Mark Campbell — stepping in for Scott Nelson who is currently teaching improv in China — will walk onto the stage Saturday with only a few basic props and their comedic wit asking audience members for a word or phrase that will launch them into sketches and improvised song parodies. Murdoch says the show also features a few set pieces, as well as material from The Second City archives.

“We have some basic improv slots



Second City’s Laurel Krabacher performs an improv scene earlier this year during the touring production of “The Second City Hits Home.”

where we will come to the audience for suggestions and then do a scene based on that,” he says. “One, for example, is called ‘Take That Back’ where we have to take back a line of dialogue with a completely new line of dialogue. We have another scene called ‘Dystopia,’ and that’s a combination of sketch and improv. It’s structured like a scene, but there are certain areas where cast members will gesture out to the audience to get a suggestion. ‘Oh look, we’re here in Benton Harbor and the only place to eat is ...’ and we will look to the audience to help us. It’s a fun hybrid and usually gets some pretty good responses.”

Murdoch, who was born and raised in Detroit, says his path to The Second City was an unlikely one. He was on the wrestling team in high school, but after breaking his collarbone in practice, his mother, who is a nurse, strongly encouraged him to try something else. So, he auditioned for the school musical and got cast as the lead in “Once Upon a Mattress.” It was his sophomore year at the University of Michigan that Mur-

doch, at the urging of some theater friends, decided to check out the improv team, and that was it.

“I define my life in two ways,” Murdoch says. “There’s my life before sophomore year and my life after.”

His life after includes moving to Chicago in 2007, performing with iO Theater and Annoyance Theater, before landing a job on Second City’s cruise ship show, and moving up to the touring company casts.

Campbell, who is from suburban Chicago, followed a somewhat similar path. Instead of wrestling, however, he was on the competitive speech team in high school and found improv after trying stand-up comedy in college.

“Stand-up can be very solitary and sometimes unhappy or self-defeating environment where improv is purely based on collaboration and support,” he says. “That just felt right at home for me.”

Campbell is an alumnus of The Second City Conservatory, iO Training Center and Second City Training Center House Ensemble. He was on The Second City’s cruise ship



ABOVE: Second City’s Emily Fightmaster, from left, Jeffrey Murdoch improv scene earlier this year during the touring production of “the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre. ON Scott Nelson perform.

cast twice, and was hired as an understudy for the three touring company casts earlier this year.

“So much of improv is developing this special relationship between the audience and performers and it only happens at that one moment in time for those people,” Campbell says. “What’s special about this show is that we are trying to play toward familiarity to try to connect to the audience even more. We are writing scenes for a particular town or area so that now both the improv and the written scenes become really personal to people in that room as opposed to scenes that are performed all over the

country. It’s just that feeling we are all i

Since its founding Second City has been most influential at theaters in the world of well-known alumni shaped comedy for: small sampling of includes Alan Ark John Belushi, John Carell, Stephen Co Tina Fey, Bill Murray Joan Rivers and A many others.

More recently, the institution has been

Home

Despite recent turmoil, touring company focusing on show that spotlights Twin Cities



Photos provided / Tim Schmidt

h, Laurel Krabacher, Chelsea Norment and Ryan Asher perform an improv scene earlier this year during the touring production of "The Second City Hits Home."

them so there's a "this together." In 1959, The Second City came one of the most prolific comedy troupes with a long list of alumni who have generations. A notable alumni include Dan Aykroyd, Candy, Steve Elbert, Chris Farley, Ray, Mike Myers, and Sedaris, among

However, the comedy troupe is affected by

high-profile cast departures and the exits of several senior staffers. As reported last month in the Chicago Tribune, The Second City's current e.t.c. Stage revue "A Red Line Runs Through It," saw the resignations of cast members Lisa Beasley, Aasia Lashay Bullock, Scott Morehead and Peter Kim. The unusual departures came in the wake of performers not getting along back stage as well as a reaction to what has been described as an epidemic of crude audience comments ricocheting around the theater.

Andrew Alexander, the owner of the privately held company, also



Second City's Jeffrey Murdoch, left, and Scott Nelson perform an improv scene earlier this year during the touring production of "The Second City Hits Home."

confirmed the departures of Erica Daniels, the president of Second City Theatricals, and Michael Gart, Second City's chief financial officer. Alexander told the Chicago Tribune that David Quinn, who had been controller, is to be the new CFO. Alexander's son, Tyler Alexander, an executive at the theater, also told staffers he, too was taking a sabbatical.

"We've been lucky enough that it hasn't really touched our jobs," Murdoch says. "I know some managers have been switched to other areas so it might affect us in the next couple months, but so far it really hasn't. I know there's been a weird air in the building. Everyone obviously is not at their happiest, but it is all still functioning and they're nice to us and tell us as much as they can about the changes."

In the current issue of Chicago magazine, Kim describes how regular heckling morphed into hate speech forcing him to leave his gig at Second City after what he calls "a year of continued audience abuse." After news of his departure came out, Kim, who describes himself in the article as a "a gay Korean with a sassy mouth," says he was further attacked on

Twitter.

"I've had the pleasure of touring with Peter," Murdoch says. "He was in this touring company at this time last year. ... I have seen audiences respond differently to people who are different than they are. I haven't really gotten any of it, but I have seen it a lot. Sometimes people get drunk, or they want to be the funny one in the room. I don't know how malicious they are, but they say things they think is funny that actually can be very hurtful. Most audience members are fantastic, but you always get that one bad apple."

"It's these recurring isolated incidents where for that one audience they might not think anything of it because for them it hasn't happened before, but for Peter and the rest of that cast, who was experiencing all these volatile comments, it was piling up on them," Campbell adds. "The audience can walk away from it, but Peter has to come back and do it again the next night. It's not fair and he shouldn't have to deal with that."

Despite such incidents, Campbell says that cast, crew and management have all been determined to find a way through the recent turmoil to return the focus to their cutting edge

IF YOU GO

What: "The Second City Hits Home"

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

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

How much: \$29-\$45

Contact: 927-1221 or themendelcenter.com

Artist info: www.secondcity.com

comedy.

"The people here are really stepping up and making sure people are as supportive to everyone as possible in addition to the amount of support that was already in this building," he says. "People have been collaborating and coming together to make sure everyone feels safe."

That collaboration, Murdoch says, has never been an issue in the year he has been in "GreenCo.," which is one of The Second City's three touring companies.

"We do a lot of rehearsals so we are forced to hang out with each other," he says, laughing. "But actually we also are a group who really enjoys hanging out together after shows, after rehearsals and that's really when you get to know someone. The closer you are to somebody, the closer you feel you can trust them. The more you trust them, the more you rely on them in a scene."

"Improv is just being willing to go out there and look silly and knowing that everyone else is going to be doing the same," Campbell adds. "There's sort of a tradition before each show where we will all pat each other on the back and say, 'I've got your back.' The meaning behind that is that if something goes terribly wrong on stage and you look like an idiot, well, 'I've got your back and I'm going to look like an idiot, too.' We are all in this together."

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