



Photo provided

TORP (The Oak Room Players) improv comedy troupe featuring from left, Andy Sawyer, Tony Balbo, Beth Sekellick, Mike Nadolski, Patricia Muellen, Joel Smeidendorf, Sarah Spoonholtz and Amy McWhirter, performs at 7 p.m. Friday along with special guests from Crawspace Eviction and The Beckwith Theatre in *The Very Huge Improv Comedy Show*, the season finale of *The Hanson Theatre Living Room Series*.

'A near guarantee of a good time'

'The Very Huge Improv Comedy Show' brings the unexpected to LMC's Hanson Theatre

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO

Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — Despite the adjective in its title, "The Very Huge Improv Comedy Show" is not centered around the 45th president of the United States.

In fact, if it was up to Mike Nadolski, the improv comedy veteran and ring-

leader of the event that takes place Friday in the final installment of this season's Hanson Theatre Living Room Series at Lake Michigan College, politics won't come into play at all.

"We're hoping to have this be escapism from the divisiveness that permeates our culture right now," Nadolski says. "I know people want to process through it and humor is a good way to do it, but we

don't want to go there. So we're going to strive not to do anything political and see if we can get there, but with improv, you never know."

It's that not knowing aspect that makes this, and every improv performance, so unpredictable. Add that Friday's event will blend performers from three different improv teams – Nadolski's TORP (The Oak Room Players), Kalamazoo-

based Crawspace Eviction and The Beckwith Theatre Company's improv troupe – and even the players are a little unsure what to expect.

"We're hoping for good, we're hoping for funny," Nadolski says. "We're saying that adult material is possible. We're not necessarily striving for that, but we also don't want to steer away from it. We're hoping for controlled chaos where pretty

much anything could happen on stage, short of hopefully outright violence and complete, full-frontal nudity. There are some societal norms that hopefully we will stay within. I'm speaking for myself, of course, but you get 12 people on stage, and who knows?"

In fact, it's that sheer number of players – some of whom have never shared a stage together – that puts the "huge" into this particular improv comedy show. In addition to current TORP improvisers Nadolski, Tony Balbo, Amy McWhirter, Patricia Muellen, Andy Sawyer, Beth Sekellick, Joel Smiedendorf and Sarah Spoonholtz, guests Dann Sytsma and John Kasdorf from Crawlspace Eviction, and James Huffman and Gary Marshall from Beckwith are joining the fray.

"Every improv team is a little bit different and our styles are a little bit different," says Sytsma, who directs Crawlspace Eviction. "For example, we lean toward longer scenes and scene-based improv because we started with a bunch of theater people and kept that through the years. There's a chunk of games that Mike and TORP does that we have never done so that's always fun just because it helps flex different improv muscles."

Like most improv shows, it's those games that form the loose structure around each piece. All of them involve audience suggestion. Some of them include audience participation.

"We've been workshoping with Beckwith and emailing back and forth with Crawlspace and we've come up with a list of 20 scene-based games," Nadolski says. "We're going to start with freeze tag, for example, where everybody gets the chance to jump into a scene that's in progress. They'll yell freeze and whatever big action the players are undergoing they freeze where they are, get tapped on the shoulder and another player comes in their place and starts an entirely different scene based on the physical position of the performers."

IF YOU GO

What: The Very Huge Improv Comedy Show

When: 7 p.m. Friday

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

How much: \$15, \$10 for students, seniors and Mainstage members

Contact: 927-8700 or themendelcenter.com

"One of the games I always love playing is slide show, where you get people from the audience on stage and they pose in different positions and freeze as if they were in a picture on vacation or something," Sytsma adds. "Then we interpret what they are doing in the picture. It's a lot of 'This is us at Disney World just before Space Mountain exploded.'"

Another favorite of Sytsma revolves around sound effects. Volunteers from the audience will be asked to make certain sound effects into a microphone while players are in a scene. The players then react to that sound effect.

"That's always a riot because you aren't pulling (sound effects king) Michael Winslow from the audience," Sytsma says. "You are pulling random audience members who may not be able to do great sound effects on a microphone. If they've had a few drinks that's even better because their courage may be really high. Of course, they may have intended to create a lawnmower sound, and as a player you instead make them a flatulent cow. So, yeah, we're going real high-brow."

While Nadolski and Sytsma worked together two years ago in "The Ha! Ha! Holidays Show" to open the 2014 Hanson Theatre Living Room Series, this is the first time members of Beckwith's



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Crawlspace Eviction Director Dann Sytsma will be among those joining TORP for "The Very Huge Improv Comedy Show."

young improv team have joined in.

"Mike came to one of our shows and was impressed with what we had started here at The Beckwith and asked us to participate, which we were really excited

about," says Huffman, who created the team with Ryan Murray in 2015. "Mike is very experienced. You can tell just by the way he carries himself. So it's beneficial for our group who doesn't have that experience to work with them and pick up on some of the things they do so well."

For Nadolski, who hasn't performed improv in about six months, the idea that anything can happen remains as enticing as ever.

"What really makes an improv show good is the energy that happens out of the spontaneity," he says. "The audience and the players all show up having really no idea what's going to happen. There's a certain amount of joy in that creativity and a certain amount of terror at the same time. I think the conflict between those two is what creates that extra energy. ... In fact, I think I'm the most excited I've been for a show in some time because there's so much uncertainty here. I have no idea what's going to happen, but I know it's going to be good. That's my feeling about it. It's a near guarantee of a good time."

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