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Broads create smart, bold comedy

October 31, 2010

By Cara Slingerland



Left to right, the ladies of broadminded comedy are Stacy Babl, Megan McGee, Melissa Kingston, and Anne Graff LaDisa. ~photo Jennifer Janviere

On a recent Monday night up in Melissa Kingston's Bay View Terrace condo, the four ladies of broadminded comedy were busy discussing zombies. In particular, zombies of the *Resident Evil* variety, and if their audience will make the connection between the evil corporation in the video games and Microsoft.

Zombies made the agenda as Milwaukee's only all-female comedy troupe planned its final show of the year, *Lions and Tigers and Zombies?*, which opens mid-November at Bay View's Alchemist Theatre.

Affectionately known as the broads, since 2006 Stacy Babl, Anne Graff LaDisa, Kingston, and Megan McGee have written and performed comedy sketches on topics ranging from current events and politics to pop and geek culture. Think *Saturday Night Live*, but much smarter, even less afraid, and more local—with added gender-bending twists.

The broads have learned how to mix physical and low-brow humor with clever, biting satire or witty spoofs. Just one example—a sketch written by McGee where real humans act out the poking, friending, and sheep-throwing synonymous with virtual friendships on Facebook.

Each of their shows has a theme. *Lions and Tigers and Zombies?* follows the likes of *Science & Surplus* and *Blue Plate Special*. The broads have portrayed everything from drunk, beer-bellied male deer hunters up north; to pit-scratching, drug-addicted primates in a lab; to toga-clad senators debating curriculum planning in ancient Rome.

So zombies are really not too far afield, and the diversity of the broads' real-world interests and backgrounds provides fodder for a wide range of material.

"That's the good thing about having four different people," McGee said. "You have totally different viewpoints. If one person doesn't get it, that's kind of like, 'Is a quarter of the audience not going to get it?'"

The broads say they ultimately write for themselves and figure that if at least one of them finds a joke funny, chances are some in the audience will, too.

Who Are These Broads?

Each of the four quick-witted broads is college-educated, and each brings different styles and experiences to the creative process.

McGee's onstage persona snaps like an energetic Slinky. She's brought to life characters ranging from the nasal misfit, Helen, who cites her adherence to the metric system in defense of a skirt length that violates the office policy by two inches, to a hooded male teenager with excessively baggy jeans confessing his "rebel" aspirations to a priest. "People didn't realize who it was," McGee said of the wannabe rebel. "It's fun to get to the point where you're a different person. That's hard to pull off."

More recently, she played a stodgy anthropology professor who breaks down the history of everything with a rapid-fire narration to the tune of Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire"—synched to a slideshow that poked fun at both science and creationism.

Offstage, when she's not working in customer service for Direct Supply, the Riverwest resident is also one determined broad. McGee spends hours editing the group's videos and scoured *The Wizard of Oz* for material for the upcoming show. She said she's always looking for ways to push things to be funnier, to, in her words, "punch them up."

Graff LaDisa, a Wauwatosa resident who by day is a pharmacist at Aurora Sinai Hospital, is the most soft-spoken of the group. One of her favorite characters to portray was the loveable Pluto, forced to deal with its ex-planet status at the equivalent of an interplanetary high school dance. And then there's her recurring Sally Ann, the inspiration for broadminded's "My boyfriend is a Jedi" T-shirts.

"She was in our very first show, and that sketch was one of the first things I wrote for broadminded," Graff LaDisa said. "She's just an awkward, nerdy teenager, but at the same time she has a confidence about her because

she knows who she is. It's fun to see her interact with people because she lives in her own world."

Graff LaDisa has also been known to tote out a guitar or ukulele to deliver a song—or quasi-song.

"I enjoy playing roles where there are opportunities for laughs without a word being spoken," Graff LaDisa said. "It challenges your sense of comedic timing, and when you get it right, it feels great."

Kingston, a Bay View resident who teaches kindergarten in Oak Creek, is extroverted and boisterous both onstage and off, with a bounding energy that doubtless carries over into her classroom. She speaks excitedly with small hand gestures, and, in conversation, punctuates a characteristic spiel on politics with an oft-used question, "What's up with *that*?"

Kingston's characters range widely, though she often is cast as a doddering male, and can put on a number of thick foreign accents—and sometimes a thicker mustache to boot. She's enjoyed playing Mary Poppins at a job placement workshop and Wildflower Gingerroot, "a hippie that has lost her way and ended up married to a right-wing Republican trucker who has showed her the error of her ways," Kingston said.

She takes pride in addressing political and cultural topics through her writing. "I like that I was able to frame nuclear war/energy conservation in a fun dysfunctional family scene, and also I love that we anthropomorphized the planets into a teen drama," said Kingston, who will play the zombie scarecrow in the new show.

Babl lives in Milwaukee and works at a hotel in human resources, but her broadminded alter-egos tend to be sarcastic and/or wild—she's been prone to launch her body across the stage. "A high tolerance for pain has its rewards," Babl said, "as does a mother who wouldn't let her daughter with the gaping hole in her knee come in the house to clean up the wound until she stopped crying."

Babl's the force behind the sketch about zombies and Microsoft, and the issues she's able to address through her characters are complex. She played Hubbard, a la L. Ron, in the aforementioned sketch where the ancient Romans debate their curriculum priorities. She also portrayed "a sarcastic and very pregnant woman" who called out "the ridiculous pregnant lady who walks past a person on the sidewalk smoking and is convinced her unborn baby is now harmed for life." In *Science & Surplus*, Babl was crybaby North Korea in Kingston's "Nuclear Family" sketch, and the wiry actress has a habit of transforming into Elvis when you least expect it.

McGee and Graff LaDisa met each other in the early 2000s at ComedySportz, where they played on the same minor league team, Your Dad's Constituents, and later met Babl and Kingston. Broadminded first performed at the 2006 Milwaukee Sketch and Improv Fest, originally including three other women. Soon after, when time commitment needed to put together quality material became clear, the group shrank to its current four members.

Bay View's Alchemist Theatre, with its theater-for-rent philosophy, has been the broads' home base since it opened in 2007, though they've performed at the Chicago Sketch Fest, for private parties, and hope to go to Austin, Texas next year.

Bringing It All Together

Writing comedy that actually makes people laugh is hard enough, but the broads also create content collaboratively. "You might have an idea for a line," Babl said, "but then [the others] up the ante, and it rolls and becomes hilarious."

With four different personalities to reconcile, the broads developed rules and a regimen that sprang from their backgrounds in improv. One of broadminded's rules is that everyone writes something for every show. A sketch's author is also its director and usually an actor. Casting can be more collaborative.

"We're at a point where if there's a role that would probably make someone uncomfortable to play it, we'd

probably cast them in it right away,” McGee said, with Kingston poking the mild-mannered Graff LaDisa in the ribs.

It also takes guts to share one’s work and be open to change. “When you bring a sketch that you think is good, and then you open it up, and [the other broads] are like [despondent sigh], you feel like you’re losing something that’s yours,” Kingston said.

“I researched molecular biology, and it took two hours,” Babl chimed in, commenting about the work it sometimes takes to write a sketch.

“But if you want more fart jokes, fine,” McGee said, laughing.

The broads are also students of their craft. Kingston points to a recent appearance by Betty White on *Inside the Actors Studio*, hosted by James Lipton, as a study in comedy. “You want to talk about someone who wouldn’t break [character]? That woman never breaks,” Kingston said.

Babl, who emulates the sarcasm of *Arrested Development*’s Michael Bluth, derives some inspiration from television shows like *The Carol Burnett Show* and *Laugh-in*. But she recently was an extra on the set of *Entourage*. Graff LaDisa complimented Babl on the organizational principles she brought back from her experience. “Instead of watching Jeremy Piven, she’s watching the script supervisor,” Graff LaDisa said. “Then she comes back and is like, ‘This is how we’re going to run our video.’”

Babl and McGee both graduated from the Second City Conservatory program in Chicago, a series of advanced improv classes. McGee is the only broad with a formal education in theater. She finds inspiration in a YouTube series, *Auto-Tune the News*, which parodies news clips by converting the speakers’ words into quantized song vocals.

The broads are sometimes fighting the perception that their shows are geared for only women.

“Yeah we’re all women, and yeah, that makes us unique, but it’s not like a chick flick,” Babl said. “We try to stop ourselves and say, ‘Is this only a female perspective?’”

McGee said the group’s tagline is “by women, for everyone.”

“We try hard to make things that are smart, clever, topical, relatable,” Kingston said.

Lions and Tigers and...Zombies?

Broadminded’s press release describes the November show as “*The Wizard of Oz* meets the Cranberries, pessimism meets optimism, the far west suburbs meets the central city.” Five of the sketches will be set to music.

For the program, Kingston wrote a musical mash-up, where different ideas and songs are mashed together, including a medley about voting that pits the apathetic versus “those that think voting is this magical part of citizenry.” Each person has her own song, one of which spoofs a John Lennon tune and another the already-parodied *Avenue Q*.

Some sketches get fully written out, while other sketches get “beat” out using more improvisational techniques. Still others are prerecorded, like Graff LaDisa’s commercial about a particular fast food sandwich.

Videos have become a staple of broadminded’s shows, as they allow time for costume changes and for material that doesn’t translate easily to stage. Past video sketches featured the symptoms of the fictional disease “Alcohol Induced Pole Dancing” and the “Statistics of Online Dating.”

Videos in between sketches also build and control the show's rhythm, according to McGee, as do other theatrical transitions like short setups with a punch line before a blackout. For *Zombies*, for example, Babl wrote a short about the Black Friday shopping ritual.

Given the show's title, McGee said she felt compelled to write two sketches spoofing *The Wizard of Oz*, which will bracket the show and may or may not involve live animals. "No one will get mauled," McGee promised, adding that there will be no live lions or tigers. Live zombies, however, are guaranteed.

Michael Timm contributed to this report.

Broadminded comedy's shows are recommended for age 14 and up. Lions and Tigers and Zombies? runs at the Alchemist Theatre, 2569 S. Kinnickinnic Ave., 8pm on Nov. 12-13 and Nov. 19-21. Admission is \$8.

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