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Local wants to start an improv comedy troupe in Elko



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By DYLAN WOOLF HARRIS — dharris@elkodaily.com | Posted: Friday, January 20, 2012 8:28 am | (0) Comments

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ELKO — Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco all foster remarkable improvisational comedy scenes. And Elko, someday. Not yet though. But Michael Gerber, Great Basin College adjunct professor, hopes to build an improv community in Elko to perform at various venues in the vicinity, and grow into a city staple.

If the goal seems lofty for a small mining city, Gerber doesn't see it that way.

"It is almost ideal here to start something like that," he said. "If you go to Chicago and start an improv troupe in Chicago, you are one in a million, one tiny face in a sea of millions."

He said participants will be genuine, and those who have some interest will finally have an outlet for improv comedy. And as far as a perceived lack of culture in Elko, Gerber doesn't see that either.

Gerber's wife, Christine Young-Gerber, was offered a job at Great Basin College as head of the theater department last summer — which brought the couple to Elko. She visited the area before taking a job, Gerber said.

"It's funny because we did have preconceived notions about Elko," he said. But after visiting Elko the two changed their tune. "She talked a lot about cowboy poetry, and talked about the fact that there are two theater groups running in Elko," Gerber said, adding that the two attended and enjoyed open mic performances at Duncan LittleCreek one night.

In addition, Gerber said he believes big cities aren't the only places that harbor artistic minds, but some of the smaller cities don't have as many venues for artists to share their talents.

But first things first. The Globe wasn't built in a day, and Gerber doesn't expect to start a traveling improv theater troupe overnight, so he is beginning by teaching a continuing education improv class at GBC.

Anyone can sign up, and indeed an eclectic group is preferred, Gerber said.

"In a more formal setting, I would say it is for actors. But it's not just for actors," he said. "It's really an exercise in making yourself open to the moment and readily available to anything that comes at you. If you're a teacher you need to be ready for anything, if you're a business person you've got to be ready. It basically creates a flexibility in the brain that you can take on anything as it comes at you."

Gerber has made a point of inviting people who are a little reserved as well.

"It's such a release for (participants), who are constantly thinking of deadlines and due dates, the future

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and jobs," he said. "It frees a person up to stay in the moment, which I think is lacking... If people were to take on a comedy improv mentality in their daily lives, I think they would be a lot less stressed and able to deal with difficult situations."

Some people are terrified of being in the spotlight or addressing a wide audience, and Gerber said improv is a healthy way to deal with fears such as these.

Gerber said he has coaxed friends in the past at Clackamas Community College in Oregon City, Ore., where he attended out of high school, to join improv comedy. Some of those friends only joined after much badgering, then enjoyed themselves, and then started improv troupes on their own later.

"I think the reason why comedy improv is so spectacular and celebrated is because it is a performance but there is an intellectual acrobatic quality to it," he said. "I'm a big believer that if you want to be a stronger performer, whether you're in comedy or not, you take comedy improv, because it makes you so nimble. It keeps you mentally so limber."

Those skills developed in an improv comedy class transcend the stage, he said.

Gerber was gently prodded himself into improv comedy as a young undergraduate at CCC. Gerber came from the Northwest hipster-thick town of Portland, Ore., but didn't see himself as a comedy instructor or even an actor.

"I graduated from high school and I had these highfalutin ideas in my brain that I was going to go out and strike it out as a playwright," Gerber said. "I didn't want to act, I didn't want to direct, I just wanted to be a playwright, because I thought there was this bohemian dignity attached to it. I had this serious script that I had written, and I was trying to find ways of getting it looked at and ultimately getting it produced one day."

One friend suggested Gerber take his script to the head of CCC's theater department David Smith-English.

"When he opened that door he invited me in, had a huge warm gracious grin on his face and offered me a seat without knowing who I was or why I was there," Gerber said of his first meeting with English-Smith.

The two began discussing the script while English-Smith simultaneously convinced Gerber to sign up for college and earn a degree. Once he was in the theater department, Gerber's ambitions changed from being a brooding, coffee-addled author hunched over a typewriter in a dank room, to a young theater scholar experiencing every aspect of the art.

"My involvement with that theater was so heavy. I met Monday through Saturday. I would get there at 9 o'clock in the morning," he said.

Eventually Gerber went on to earn a master's degree in theater directing at Ohio University, interned, then managed, a Shakespeare theater company in Orlando (where he met his wife who landed a role in one of the company's productions), and then came full circle and filled in as head of the theater department at CCC when Smith-English went on sabbatical.

He began teaching classes he attended while at CCC, such as improv comedy.

In his classes, Gerber divides the time between exercises and forms.

Exercises are smaller routines used to get the group in rhythm, which he said is immensely important to improv. Forms are more similar to what participants do on stage.

Along the way, Gerber will tell his students about the importance of coming to class open and unprepared.

"I always have to tell the group at the beginning of a semester, if you're a stand-up comedian, this isn't the place to try out your routine," Gerber said.

He has seen students try to re-live funny moments that occurred outside the improv class, only to have their material fall flat.

Spontaneity is so important, Gerber emphasizes it before anything else, including humor, because a visceral, uninhibited act will connect with the audience and sooner than later something funny will happen on stage, Gerber said.

And of course, Gerber said, improv is a lot of fun.

"Improv comedy is a huge release," he said.

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