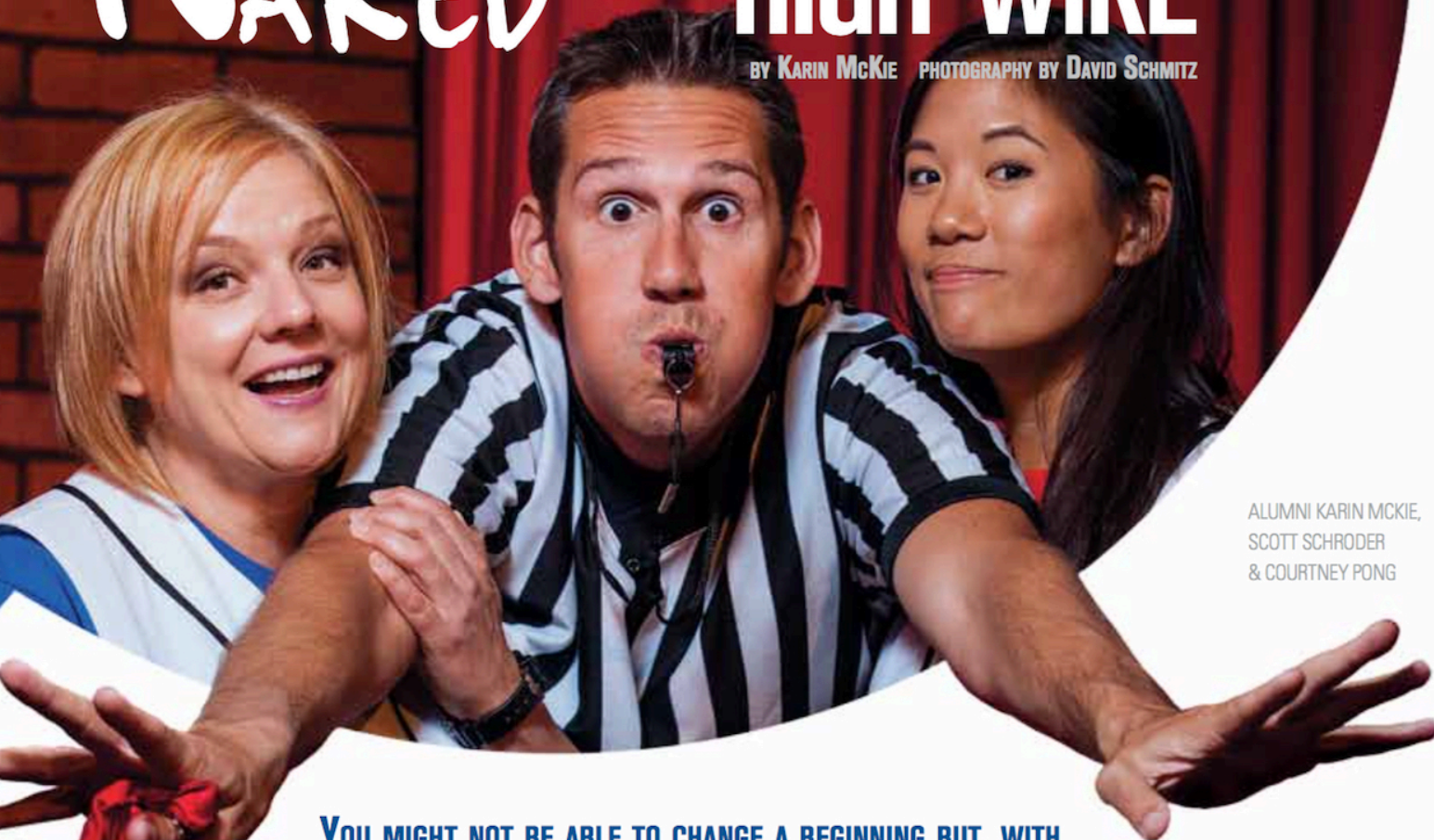


NAKED ON A HIGH WIRE

BY KARIN MCKIE PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID SCHMITZ



ALUMNI KARIN MCKIE,
SCOTT SCHRODER
& COURTNEY PONG

YOU MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO CHANGE A BEGINNING BUT, WITH IMPROVISATIONAL TECHNIQUES, YOU CAN CHANGE AN ENDING.

"Who's your favorite musician?"

The group busts out some verbal beats to back me up.

*Boom, chick, da boom-boom chick.
Boom, chick, da-wicky, wicky,
wicky.*

I jump in.

*There is this guy, this
British fellow.*

*He wears geeky specs. His name is
Elvis Costello.*

He's a friend to me and a friend to you.

And please keep in mind that his "Aim Is True."

In unison, the circle says, *"That was awesome!"*

I invented that rap, on the spot, at an improvisation workshop last spring. After a long hiatus (I left improv to do Shakespeare and "regular" theater in 1996), I'm back performing, rehearsing and playing with ComedySportz San José, an ensemble that makes short-form comedy using a sports format based on audience suggestions. Naked on a high wire, basically.

Graduate school brought me to Silicon Valley. I came for an MFA in Creative Writing at San José State, a mere two blocks east of the 25-year-old comedy institution's downtown location.



During 2009 and 2010, I was too busy writing and attempting to quash a midlife crisis—I mean: make a career change—to check out northern California’s ComedySportz, the international organization I had previously performed with in Washington, D.C., and Chicago. But the San Carlos Street marquee beckoned and taunted me with “shows every Friday and Saturday night” whenever I passed by on my way to campus.

I had been immersed in scribbling memoir and plays for stage and screen, but I missed performing. I had no satisfying outlet for my theatrical storytelling, no platform for my wry observations. I had put up one-woman show segments during my time in the Windy City and wanted to bring my ideas from the page to the stage again. I longed not only to communicate, but also to be heard. Plus, worried about essay deadlines, and, well, my midlife crisis, I wasn’t laughing a lot.

Maybe it was the Psycho Donuts shop in the ComedySportz/Camera 3 lobby that sealed the deal, but in July 2011, I stopped by to see if I could watch, just watch, the weekly workshops. Within a few weeks I was playing again. Like Michael Corleone, just when I thought I was out, they pulled me back in.

ComedySportz has pulled in other San José State alumni, too, primarily from communications fields, which are remarkably similar to competitive improvisation: they employ imaginative messaging and creative problem-solving. They also provide a productive outlet for smartasses like me.

Referee, player and improv coach Courtney Pong, ’09 Public Relations, started with ComedySportz’s High School League in her hometown of Modesto and has been an enthusiastic team member for ten of her almost 30 years.

At SJSU, Pong worked for the inaugural, student-run P.R. agency Dwight, Bentel & Hall, named after the campus building, which was named after the journalism program’s founder. Currently, she’s a social media specialist for high-tech firm Eastwick. Pong appreciates that improv co-mingles with her work, especially the social networking aspects. “Teamwork shows up at both ComedySportz and at the office. Every interaction is an opportunity to build and support ideas and people, a way to find something wonderful, beyond the expected, that I couldn’t have discovered on my own.”

COMEDY IS JUST TRAGEDY REVERSED.

WISLAWA SZYMBORSKA



WHAT IS IMPROVISATION?

Improvisation is created on the spot, based on simple audience suggestions, like the Drew Carey

TV show “Whose Line Is It Anyway?” Unlike standup comedy, improv is an unscripted, instant slice-of-life, performed in short or long formats.

Improv follows guidelines that are successful in the workplace too:

“Yes, and ...”

Accept and add to every suggestion, on stage or in business meetings.

Make your partner look good.

Support and take care of your peers.

Don’t be funny. “Keep it real.”

Honest, grounded relationships, rather than forcing jokes, drive good comedy and successful careers.

Listen

Imperative for improv, business and life.

WIN COMEDYSORTZ TICKETS!

Enter to win one of 25 pairs of tickets by sending the answers to the questions below, along with your name, graduation year and major, to wsqeditor@sjsu.edu. Mention the name of your business and be entered to win a free one-hour corporate training session.

Which of these is not a ComedySportz warm-up game?

- a. Zoom-Schwartz-Profigliano
- b. Quid-Pro-Quo
- c. Bibbity-Bibbity-Bop
- d. Zip-Zap-Rap

Which of the three current ComedySportz fouls used to be known as The Waffling Foul?

- a. The Brown Bag Foul
- b. The Groaner Foul
- c. The Delay of Game Foul

ComedySportz is the longest-running show in Silicon Valley, celebrating 25 years this September. This international organization has teams in most major U.S. cities, where the short-format, all-ages comedy is played as a sport. *For more, visit sjsu.edu/ws/q/comedysportz.*

THE CREATIVE ADULT IS THE CHILD WHO SURVIVED AFTER THE WORLD TRIED KILLING THEM, MAKING THEM "GROWN UP."

URSULA K. LE GUIN

For me, as a kid growing up in the metro D.C. area, I hid my socially inept and geeky center self behind jokes. The mask of comedy as a shield. The power of parody. The armor of humor.

In order to fit in, I memorized routines by Steve Martin, who reminds us that "comedy is not pretty," and George Carlin, who showed me how to be (okay, attempt to be) cool, by repeating his "Seven Words You Can't Say on Television" to anybody who would listen. Bill Cosby kept it clean. Like one of his album titles, "I Started Out as a Child," I parroted his Lone Ranger "don't go to town, Kimosabe" riff so many times that the misspelled Kemo became my nickname for two decades.

My proudest accomplishment at my large northern Virginia high school was receiving the "senior superlative" of class clown for my Monty Python "silly walks" up and down the hallways and other acts of feigned fearlessness.

ComedySportz ensemble member Scott Schroder, '04 Advertising, was also a self-described goofy kid and awkward student. He had awful taste in clothes and credits humor with helping him fit in during high school and at San José State.

"Comedy gets you friends. And improv training translates into life outside school, too, like saying 'yes' to offers, and committing to who you are. Some will accept you, and some won't," Schroder says. "But at least they've got to respect your commitment, like my commitment to pulling off a neon orange hunting vest and a mechanic's jumpsuit."

Schroder, who now runs Happy Fish Swim School in Fremont, says "Of course, it's not what you know, it's who you know, and comedy is all about building genuine interpersonal relationships."

THE DUTY OF COMEDY IS TO CORRECT MEN BY AMUSING THEM.

MOLIÈRE

Pong, Schroder and I not only create shows at ComedySportz, we also trek back over to campus to train and entertain a variety of SJSU groups. Over the past couple of decades, the ensemble has performed for freshman orientation, the Academic Affairs Council, fraternities and sororities, at the Dining Commons and King Library, and has taught student leadership team-building workshops.

"Kids are natural improvisers, like when they make a refrigerator box into a spaceship, or play cops and robbers, or chat up an imaginary friend," says Artistic Director Jeff Kramer, who also performs and teaches at ComedySportz and at Ohlone College. "We try to remind students of the importance of this type of play, not only for enjoyment, but to brainstorm, and to show that ideas can percolate up through fun."

Improv activities create nontraditional—and non-boring—ways to foster innovation and can give San José State graduates a leg up when applying at Silicon Valley firms and beyond.

"People make things up every day in classrooms and in boardrooms," says Kramer. "Improv

imparts crucial life skills to everybody, but it's particularly helpful to students entering the workforce. You need to be able to roll with the punches."

COMEDY IS SIMPLY A FUNNY WAY OF BEING SERIOUS.

PETER USTINOV

Since improvisation is about embracing chaos, improv training is growing as a business tool. Through exercises and activities, ComedySportz training workshops help companies find new and creative ways to team build. Most activities resemble children's games—interactive and on your feet.

"Just getting away from your cubicle helps communication," says Pong. "We're literally thinking and working outside of that box."

Typical icebreaker games include untying human knots to expand ideas about cooperation, or group-think explorations like "Tiger, Martian, Salesman." For this exercise, a trio stands back-to-back and then turns around to act out one of those characters, like playing three-way "rock,

paper, scissors." The goal is to have everyone eventually make the same motion at the same time. Focused participants usually do so in a handful of tries. Matching up is strangely satisfying.

The lessons learned are: be present, connect with your teammates, and accept that sometimes your idea dominates and sometimes it doesn't. Either way is absolutely okay. "And when was the last time you got to be a tiger or a Martian?" Schroder asks.

"Improv is play," Pong says. "Adults don't play enough, and we should. It releases stress, strengthens relationships and opens minds."

Humor reminds all comers to relax, enjoy and go with the flow. Comedy is soothing because it's primal, innate. Improvisation also erases a fear of failure, because within comedy failure is expected, encouraged and even celebrated.

By simply being in the moment, even a mediocre rap can become a transient work of art.

COMEDY IS ACTING OUT OPTIMISM.

ROBIN WILLIAMS

