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Playing the Short and the Long of It, Un-Scripted By BETSY M. HUNTON Special to the Planet



Probably one of the toughest jobs an improvisational theater company has in putting on a show must be figuring up a title. Think about it: Since nobody knows what the actors are going to do on any given night, how on earth do they find a title

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encouraging people to give it a try?

The Un-Scripted Theater Company (a smart name in itself) has come up with a great one for their current production at Oakland's Temescal Arts Center. It's The Short and the Long of it.

That's even an accurate description of the evening's events.

The program is divided into two parts (you can't say "acts" about Improv can you?) with the first section consisting of very short, and wonderfully silly, skits created on the spot on themes that members of the audience suggest. The second half of the entertainment is the more rarely seen "Long Form Improv."

Again, the audience selects the idea, but this time there's only one theme chosen from a group of ten audience proposals.

Last Saturday night the theme was "Berkeley." (Afterwards, one of the actors said that, curiously enough, this was the first time that idea had ever been proposed). The actors turned it into a tale of two students, one male, one female, leaving home for the first time, and entering Berkeley dorm life as freshmen.

Most of the obvious issues (except class work) were touched on—weird roommates, oddball food, initiation to pot, falling in love, and commitment to a huge stack of idealistic goals in a kind of grand finale. Again, the ensemble played it as a smooth production, not so smooth that one suspected rehearsal, but without unexpected silences or abandoned themes.

The thing about the Un-Scripted people is that they're there for fun themselves. The people that you're watching perform are enjoying themselves and they fully expect you to have a really good time, too. And you do, no question about it. These guys are good.

This is definitely Improv, but no way is it the kind you may have wandered into at a party a while back. It's funny, mind you, and harmlessly comic, often absurd, and nobody's pushing a message. But it's far from amateur night.

The Un-Scripted performers have spent years working together—at least three years with this particular company, but most of them share experience beyond that, going back about nine years. And they have rehearsals. You could argue that the key to their performances is that they've learned to communicate with each other really, really well ... and, if you felt like speculating, it might be fun to consider how much of that communication is non-verbal.

So what you get in one of their productions are bubbles of absurdity, based on ideas suggested by the audience, within a framework proposed by the actors. And the results are smooth. There are no sudden "Uh's" or abrupt moments of silence from someone failing to grab an idea. These people have learned to play a kind of verbal basketball with each other, catching a cue and taking off with it, quite possibly in a totally different direction.

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So far as a review goes, well, that gets a little complicated, since every night's performance is unique. But does their work look worth going back another time?

Definitely yes.

The Un-Scripted Theater Company presents The Short and the Long of It Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m., through June 25 at Temescal Arts Center, 511 48th St., Oakland. Tickets \$7-\$10. For details, call 415-869-5384, or see www.un-scripted.com.>

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