

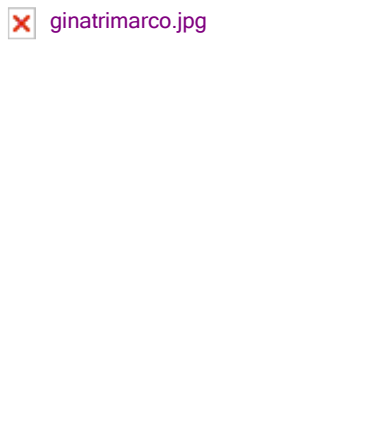


- Home
- News & Views
- Eats & Drinks
- Music
- Movies
- Goofing Off
- Lifestyles
- Raves & Rage
- Contests

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Improv Instruction: Can You Teach Funny?

Paul Grimshaw - For Weekly Surge



ginatrimarco.jpg

Carolina Improv Company's Instructor, Gina Trimarco.



toddyohn.jpg

Anyone who's seen undercover prankster Sacha Baron Cohen's character Borat try to learn comedy from an all-too-real, yet inept New York City comedy instructor may question the supposition that comedy can be taught. Clearly Borat's teacher was clueless. His attempt to teach "Not" jokes on a dry-erase board prove that. And conversely, Cohen proved to be hysterical in the spoof - he knows how to be funny, and it comes off the top of his head.

While bad teachers, like Borat's, can spoil any learning process, some, like Carolina Improv Company's instructor Gina Trimarco, has seen first hand that funny can indeed be taught, and for her, her students, and for many comic geniuses, it starts with the freedom of improvisational comedy.

Improv, like that seen on TV's "Whose Line is it Anyway?," is often the proving ground for comics and actors alike. Chicago's 50-year-old comedy institute, The Second City, is the Mecca of improv, and it's where Trimarco received her training. She offers classes for beginners (101), intermediate (201), and advanced (301) students, as well as semi-annual stand-up and sketch comedy writing classes, offered by visiting professionals.

Trimarco's six-week improv classes, taught at the recently opened Uptown theater, located in the Myrtle Beach Mall (formerly Colonial Mall), repeat eight-to-ten times per year. Tuition is \$150 per class and students who graduate are sometimes asked to audition for a performance spot during Friday and Saturday evening improv shows at the venue.

In the same way our college Speech Communications classes trained us to be better public speakers and critical thinkers, Trimarco's beginner classes teach anybody how to loosen up. "We don't focus on the comedy in our 101 class," she said, "because the students aren't there yet. We like to say 'funny happens,' and you're encouraged to not try to be funny. It's about being free with your creativity, because comedy organically happens that way." The 201, and 301 classes start to help students find patterns and they spend time dissecting their work, and performing improv exercises. The classes are based loosely on Trimarco's training at The Second City. "There are so many different philosophies, but all improv is based on the concept of 'yes, and...,' where you accept [your improv partner's] idea, build on it, and explore it. You never say 'no' to an idea in improv."

Todd Yohn, stand-up comic, and headliner at new comedy club Stand Up Carolina in Murrells Inlet tonight through Saturday, has also seen inexperienced, un-funny people turn the funny-button on. "In one breath I would say 'you can't be taught,'" said Yohn, "but I used to own a club in High Point [N.C.] and I saw this one guy come in night after night, and ask to do just one joke, and I just didn't see it. I thought he could never pull it off. But within six months he ended up featuring for me on New Year's Eve, and now he's headlining across the country. Some comics are naturally funny, but you can teach techniques to help get more comfortable on stage."

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