



## OnStage: Sustainable comedy with Brave New Workshop

Brave New Workshop, Star Tribune

"The Brave New Workshop Saves the Planet, or yes We Can, But Do We Have To?"

Brave New Workshop may poke fun at Save the Planet foibles, but it's also looking at its own carbon footprint.

By **GRAYDON ROYCE**, Star Tribune

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Reducing paper waste, undergoing carbon footprint audits, composting, eliminating disposal cups. Isn't this the kind of earnest, "Green-nik" stuff that Brave New Workshop should be lampooning -- rather than practicing in its day-to-day business?

"We make fun of a lot of things we believe in," said artistic director Caleb McEwen. "But to be honest, it's not something we think about. We're an arts organization, and by necessity we have to be efficient."

McEwen directs the troupe's new revue, "The Brave New Workshop Saves the Planet, or Yes We Can, But Do We Have To?" The show, which opens tonight in Minneapolis, intends

to satirize America's current zeal for all things green.

"A theme in the show is that everyone wants these things, but not the responsibility," McEwen said of the public's thirst for clean, green efficiency.

Granted, it's human nature to resist sacrifice for a greater good, although that tendency seems to have accelerated since the Bush administration urged the nation to fight terrorism by shopping. (If I don't buy those chinos, the terrorists win.)

While McEwen's actors will poke fun at America's angst on stage, the Workshop in real life has scrubbed up its bad-boy image and become a good citizen. Two years ago, the organization brought in Elena Imaretska, a consultant in sustainability for small businesses. It's not just being green, she said on a recent day when the air conditioner blowing through the Workshop's lobby seemed far from green. Sustainability preaches three tenets: profit (don't depend on others for your income), people (treat 'em right) and planet (conserve and give back to the community).

Marketing director Stephanie Scott, after making a lap around the building in futile

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search of a switch for that damn air conditioner, said the Workshop felt pretty good about the first two legs of the stool but recognized growth potential in the green zone. To that end, disposable drink cups -- which could exceed 1,000 a week -- were disposed of. Tap beer pushed out bottled brews. Opening-night pizza fests have been declared waste-free. Food scraps, cardboard boxes, cutlery made of potato starch and napkins are all sent off to an industrial composter. Office paper use has been cut by 65 percent.

### Changing lightbulbs

In the theater, Scott said the organization would like to replace old lighting instruments with high-efficiency LED models that might reduce usage to 3,931 kilowatt hours from 21,892 kwh. Patrons who prove they arrived by bike (show your helmet) or bus (a ticket) get a free drink at the bar.

Scott and Imaretska also brought in the Green Light Team, an organization consisting of graduate students from the University of Minnesota's College of Design. The idea was to shake out inefficiencies in the building. Katie Dale and Amber Sausen traded their expertise for improvisational

training and focused on basement classrooms, eliminating bottlenecks in the lobby and restroom crowding. Zero waste was a key principle, so when office walls were torn down to allow more flexibility and natural light, the studs and paneling were used to build tables and bookcases.

The Workshop already has a leg up on theaters that build (and then tear down) elaborate sets and costumes. Its brand of improv and sketch comedy resists such lavish outlays. Besides, good old frugality reigns supreme.

"You see the same props or costume pieces all the time because we say, 'Let's make sure we get our 12 bucks worth out of this,'" said McEwen. "We didn't think of it as green as much as we were just cheap."

The ethic has spread to home life. Scott put a rain barrel in her yard, Workshop owner John Sweeney bought a composter and actor Mike Fotis built a rock garden so he doesn't have to water his lawn.

Turned on its head, all this good scout activity fits perfectly in the Workshop's mission of equal-opportunity offending. You can smile at the earnest tree hugging, but the real target is our irresponsible sense

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of entitlement.

"There's this idea that even if we can't afford things, we deserve them," McEwen said. "People talk about freedom as if it frees them from responsibility, but freedom implies responsibility."

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