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Last update: April 28, 2005 at 4:50 PM

Brave New Workshop: An oral history

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Star Tribune

Published April 29, 2005

The Brave New Workshop tonight opens what is purported to be its 251st show, "Hear No Evil, Casino Evil: What Happens in Bloomington Stays in Bloomington." The satirical revue imagines a world in which Las Vegas meets Lake Wobegon, commenting on the state government's lust for gambling revenues.

From rag-tag satirists out for a good time to a Twin Cities institution, the Brave New Workshop has built a history as the breeding ground for performers such as Al Franken and Tom Davis, Pat Proft, Peter MacNicol, Peter Tolan, Melissa Peterman and Mo Collins. How did we get here from there? Or is it, how did we get there from here?

We talked to more than a dozen alumni in search of truth in this hardheaded investigation of "Dudley Riggs: Behind the Laughter."

Dateline: Minneapolis, 1961. One-time circus performer Dudley Riggs, a theater innovator and coffeehouse operator, hatches an idea with some newspaper-writer friends.

Dan Sullivan, reporter and later Tribune theater critic, 1961-64: In Dudley's history, it all started in New York City in 1957 or something like that. In my memory, we started it in 1961. One thing we did at the very beginning was to sit down and see if we can come up with 100 ideas for bits, and we did. So we said, "OK, if we can do that just in one night, certainly there must be enough funny stuff out there that we could come up with some sort of hourlong show once a month."

Irv Letofsky, reporter and later Tribune TV critic; head writer, 1961-69: What happened was, [cartoonist] Dick Guindon was a friend and he was making coffee at Dudley's [cafe]. And Dudley said to Dick, "Maybe Irv can think of some way we can promote Cafe Espresso." So I met Dudley and Dick one night, and my suggestion was to do satirical revues. It was razzing local politicians, and I thought that would be of interest to people.

Dudley Riggs: The Instant Theatre Company, which was the beginning operation, was the earlier thing. However, when Irv and Dan and several others came on the scene, it became the Brave New Workshop. So 1961 is the correct date as far as the use of that name. I served as producer and sometimes director and performer.

Letofsky: The first show, the first half was an hour and 40 minutes. And everyone was pretty well tuckered out. It seemed longer. John Lewin liked to do these sketches and monologues with the beatnik-poet form and it was hilarious, but it went on and on.

Sullivan: One of our actors was named Ruth Williams, and we entered her in the Miss St. Paul pageant, and she was elected. Well, this made the newspaper. It was a gag, and the [sponsoring] Jaycees were pretty pissed off. You'd think we would have lost our jobs, but everyone thought it was kind of funny, young people fooling around.

Letofsky: One of our running characters was a bombastic senator, Hubert H. Humfff. He said, "Friends, this is the time for leadership. This the time for courage. This is *not* the time for old, worn-out clichés. This is the time for fresh, *new* clichés. ... Ladies and gentlemen, it's time we rolled up our sleeves and pulled down our pants!"

Eventually, improvisation began to replace the written scripts.

Riggs: The Instant Theater started as a combination of a vaudeville act and improvisational, on-the-spot theater. It sort of lost its momentum with Irv and Dan and those guys, because their interest was primarily in writing scripts. But we came back to improvisation.

Tom Sherohman, Twin Cities actor, 1964-65, 1967-72: In 1967, I was hired by Dudley and was among the first to be paid. I think it was \$35 a week. [Pat] Proft joined in late '67, and we did sometimes write a script. It turned to improvisation when Paul Menzel came aboard in about 1969. And he brought in Del Close [the Second City genius who mentored John Belushi, Bill Murray and others] for a while from Chicago to teach workshops.

Pat Proft, Hollywood screenwriter ("Naked Gun," Scary Movie 3"), 1965-66, 68-72: I brought slapstick into the mix because I grew up on Laurel and Hardy. I'm not an actor; I'm a comedian. I remember a bit I did with Sherohman. I was a pickpocket on my first job, and in the course of the five-minute bit I ripped his pants to shreds. It was one of the pieces that I wish I could somehow do again because it really worked well. It was an old, rickety place, and it was just perfect in there to do comedy. There are two places I can remember huge laughs. The screening of "Naked Gun" had the same kind of sound to it. I remember sitting in a theater in L.A. and thinking, "This sounds just like being at Dudley's."

Jim Cada, Twin Cities actor, 1973-76: It was mostly like an oral tradition with just a few things written down. We would have a loose theme as to what the show would encompass, and it should sort of bounce around that. I remember one show, we were going to try to focus on aging, but by the time we opened, we had about two scenes touching on that, and everything else was so far off the wall, there really wasn't a theme.

In 1971, Riggs opened another stage, ETC, at Seven Corners in Minneapolis, near the West Bank campus of the University of Minnesota.

Riggs: We tried anything we could get away with -- some musicals, some long plays, some obscure Chekhov. It was sort of a hobby horse. We broke some ground and essentially created the presence of women in stand-up comedy.

Susan Vass, 1982-89: We stand-ups were the redheaded stepchild of the family. Dudley gave a huge boost to my career, and I'll be ever grateful to him, but he really prized the sketch comedy, and I think he thought that stand-up was a passing fancy. From 1984 to '89, we did the women's show, "What's So Funny About Being Female?" which I co-produced with Dudley and headlined. It was like a giant, five-year-long slumber party. ETC was a wonderful experience, a showcase and a springboard for lots and lots of people. Peter Tolan, I think, started as a floor sweeper at the workshop. Talk about going on to greater things.

Peter Tolan, writer and producer ("Analyze This," The Larry Sanders Show), 1980-84: I knew no one in Minneapolis. When I arrived, it was like a movie. I took my bags off the train, and it was raining. I think Dudley was a little surprised when I showed up soaking wet. He did hire me -- as a janitor. I

maybe only did three or four shows before I decided I wanted to be more of a writer. I lacked discipline as an actor. About the 60th or 70th time I would do a sketch, I would be thinking about shopping.

Mo Collins, star of "Mad TV," 1985-87: Being in Dudley Riggs was 24-7 business. You'd pick up the newspaper in the morning, and say, "How can I spin this? How can I turn this into a sketch?" Then you'd go in at 10 in the morning. I've never drunk so much coffee or had so many cigarettes in my life. It would get so cloudy in there, we'd wonder how we were going to clear it out for the audience. I had a bad knee to begin with, and one night during an improv set, I jumped off the stage and took my ankle out. I had to finish the improv like that. I had surgery the next day. I was back on the stage the next Tuesday. That was the mentality we had.

Dane Stauffer, in San Diego cast of "Triple Espresso," 1984-87, 96-97: It really was a golden time. We progressed from short and snappy to deeper and getting more disturbing and personal things in there, still through the lens of humor, of course.

Beth Gilleland, Twin Cities actor, 1982-86: When Peter Staloch, playing father to Dane Stauffer, kissed Dane on the top of the head in one of our sketches and said, "Good night, honey," I knew a new day had dawned at the workshop.

Jim Detmar, Twin Cities actor, 1984-89: I think the reason it's different now is the emergence of cable TV. People have so much information that they're already satirizing things on TV before we can get to them. That immediacy undermines what people can go and see if you're going to run a three- or four-month run of a show.

In the mid-1990s, Riggs decided to move on to other endeavors. He sold the workshop to former company members John Sweeney, Jenni Lilledahl and Mark Bergren.

Riggs: There was a moment shortly after I met my wife when we sat down and figured out that I was running two theater buildings with two resident companies plus two touring companies, plus a little video company, plus a bar and restaurant. So once I divested the Seven Corners operation, that gave me a little time, and then later, I began looking around, and at first I thought I'll just shut the place down. But that would have been putting quite a number of people out of work.

Lilledahl: When John [Sweeney] had worked for Dudley, he had said, "Hey, if you're ever interested in retiring, give me a call." So Dudley called in the fall of 1996 and said, "I'd like you to consider buying the theater." At first, John said no and set up a meeting with Dudley and some folks at Second City [the famous Chicago comedy theater] to see if they would be interested. Dudley went to Chicago, and I think he wasn't interested in giving up all the history he had created. So he and John talked more, and he convinced us to come back.

Riggs: They've been very kind to me. I come to the opening nights, and they're respectful, but I don't micromanage their shows. They haven't embarrassed me with anything. They have taken the theater in directions that are different from what I would have, but that's always been the history of the theater. Every time new people are hired, it ebbs and flows.

The 1990s continued a trend of grooming performers who move on to bigger and better things.

Melissa Peterman, co-star of "Reba," 1996: John Sweeney and Mark Bergren came to see me in "Tony 'N' Tina's Wedding" and offered me a spot. I was making pretty good money and only working a couple hours a night, and I knew I'd be going to a place where you had to work 60 hours a week, but

growing up, it was the place to be. I looked up to everyone that was there, and I envisioned that their lives were fabulous. For me, it was like "Saturday Night Live." Dudley has never had Lorne Michaels waiting at the door, but he should be. I don't think those guys know where Minnesota is. I don't think they realize that great things happen in other places.

Cedric Yarborough, star of "Reno 911," 1999-2000: I was doing a lot of dramatic theater at Mixed Blood and Children's Theatre, and I wanted to open up and do more improv. So I took some classes, and I fell in love with it. In the audition process, they throw out scenarios, like "You're an ice-cream-truck delivery guy, but it's a Chinese movie." They also ask you to sing and do a number of characters. Melissa Peterman thought of "Ike and Tina's Wedding," and who else would be Tina than me? I think she just wanted to see me in a short skirt.

Peterman: I wanted to wear that dress! Part of it was jealousy, because I wouldn't look as good in it as he did. The man's got legs.

Yarborough: I had grown up in Prior Lake. As one of the only black kids in school, sometimes white kids would apologize for ridiculous things, like apologizing for their ancestors. So I came up with "Sorry About That Slavery."

The new owners moved the performance stage to Calhoun Square in 1998. Sweeney and Lilledahl bought Bergren's share and, in 2001, consolidated back at 2605 Hennepin Av., acknowledging they had bitten off too much. They also began to bring more structure to the process of creating shows.

Cada: I remember the first time I came to direct [in 2001], John and I met and he gave me this whole packet of things, and I was sort of blown away at how formalized things had gotten. I think for the most part it was an improvement, because we were a little too loosey-goosey, and every time a new member would join the company, we'd have to start from scratch rather than be able to hand them something.

Detmar: Although the shows have done well, I think it suffers a little bit as far as absolute creativity goes. That's what makes it somewhat different from my day -- and before my day it was even more wild.

The outlaw theater of 1961 has become an institution, a notion that amuses its founder.

Riggs: It's a satirical idea in itself that a nonacceptable form of theater has become very acceptable. But it's been a major revolution. There was a time many years ago when [Second City cofounder] Bernie Sahlins and I were talking about having a national conference of all the satirical revue companies, and there were five at the time. The idea fell through because it didn't have enough mass. But now, there are a jillion, and satire has gone more mainstream. When we did our first show in Minneapolis, whoever wrote the review said, "This is satire, folks." And then he gave a dictionary definition, and the suggestion was that people in Minneapolis didn't even know what that was. Well, I think they've glommed on to it pretty good.

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