

are COMEDY

# Going for Broke for Laughs

BY LYNN MCNICOL

Creating comedy is serious business. People study the art, including a group that meets weekly in Burlington to learn "improv," as it's called when comedians create their own humor on the spot. Many in the Wednesday night class at the Waterfront Theater belong to the 10-year-old group Kamikaze Comedy, while others are attending for the first time. Matt Wohl, one of the newer Kamikaze members, started the course last fall as part of his "Kamikaze Comedy College of Improvology." Anyone may join in, and tryouts are sometimes

This one definitely separates the beginners from the veterans, and results in lots of laughter and groans.

The two-hour practice session is full of fun and surprises, as the dozen-plus women and men create humorous situations involving photographers, jellyfish, report cards, chiropractors, dancing and almost anything else. Sometimes it gets physical when people pretend to fight, give yoga lessons or create scenes of intimacy.

There are also quieter moments as Wohl coaches participants.

"You have to justify the tuba," Wohl advises two men who are

Anyone may join in the Kamikaze Comedy 'College of Improvology,' started last fall by Matt Wohl. KC has performed benefits for SafeSpace and for R.U.1.2?

scheduled for those interested in performing with KC.

The class doubles as practice for the core members of Kamikaze Comedy. "It's an excellent refresher for us," said Matt Saltus, the only one of three founders still active with KC. "The troupe really has taken off in the last few years," he noted. KC has performed at many venues around the area, including benefits for local GLBT organizations. Making Kamikaze Comedy a success involves "trusting each other to create something together," Wohl said. "That's the key to improv."

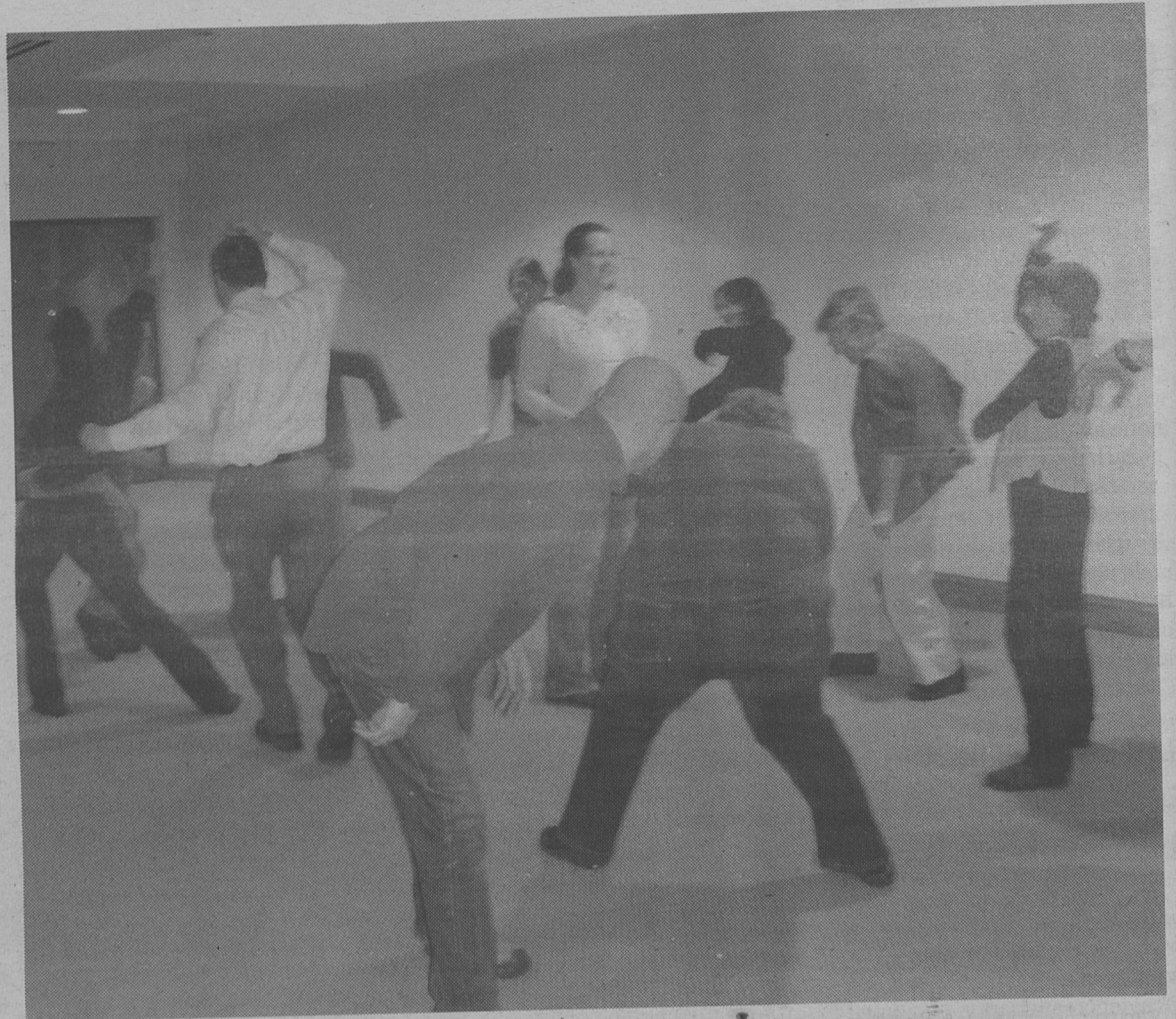
There is a basic cooperation that takes place during the warmup exercises. People have to get nonverbal permission from each other to trade places during one exercise where they are moving about in a circle.

In another, louder exercise, participants make lots of noise pretending to be elephants and "kamikaze" pilots. In the same exercise, people try to say "bop" before another person says the "bop" in "bippety-bippety-bop."

pretending to fly a hot-air balloon. One of them had just pulled an invisible tuba out from somewhere without explaining its existence. He said it was used for weight, then added an incredible tale about landing an ailing hot air balloon on a football field while the marching band was playing; thus taking out the tuba player, which "ruined my balloon." "So it's a weight AND a souvenir," deadpanned his partner. "That's exactly right," the man responded.

In another skit, Geeda pretends to need custom-made shoes for her sore feet while another woman, Chris, makes her a new pair. After some words of advice from Wohl, the shoes are finally produced and offered to the customer. "Here are the shoes," the cobbler says, holding her hands toward Geeda, then hesitates a moment. "What's your favorite color?" she asks the other woman. "Blue," Geeda answers. "They're blue," Chris says, handing them over. The class laughs and applauds.

A lot of improv scenes could



Improv classmates in mid-January get moving (above) and pose like 'junior birdmen' (left). Photos by Lynn McNicol.

and try to control our environment, and improv teaches you that whatever you are given you can make sense of it and laugh at yourself."

Saltus said his own involvement in KC "does take some work," but is something "I always have energy for." Everyone does this for a different reason, he said. For example, some people prefer improv because they don't like scripts. Saltus long ago took an acting course that included a section on improv, and when he came to Burlington, his partner gave a workshop that also included improv. Later, KC was formed.

The comedians chose the name Kamikaze Comedy because they "liked the alliteration and the rhyme," Saltus said. However, they plan to change the name so it doesn't offend anyone. But the new name is a secret - for now.

This month there will be a special opportunity for the public to engage in, observe and otherwise enjoy the art of improv. Kamikaze Comedy is hosting workshops and performances at the Waterfront Theater the weekend of February 17th through the 19th, with shows all three days and workshops on Saturday and Sunday. ▼

start two minutes later, Wohl advises. Comedians learn to leave out extraneous parts so that the audience can appreciate the fine humor at the center of the situation.

Kamikaze Comedy performs weekly at Smugglers Notch during winter and summer months, and has wowed audiences on Lake Champlain cruises, at the Vergennes Opera House, Burlington's Flynn Space, a home health agency in Addison County, and an American Legion in Middlebury.

KC has also performed benefits for SafeSpace the past three years and for R.U.1.2?, providing much-needed support - and lots of equally needed laughs - for our community.

In addition there's the "comedy marathon" at First Night in Burlington, a 12-hour-long event that celebrates bringing in the New Year. KC members and alumni sign up to perform for as short

or long a period of time as they want, Saltus said. Two alumni actually performed the entire 12 hours last year.

Jason Lorber, a stand-up comedian who produces his own shows, also does improv with Kamikaze Comedy. Lorber often performs his stand-up routine first and then joins KC's following act.

Lorber, a state legislator from Burlington who is openly gay, said he started performing in clubs and went from there. "I just did it," he laughed, "... that's the short answer." A couple of years ago Lorber put on a show for First Night called "Howard Dean, a Moose and a Gay Rabbi Walk into a Bar," and he has participated in the marathons as well.

"I find improv is a great way of dealing with change," Lorber mused. "You have to learn how to deal with what you've been given. So much of our life we plan

➔ For more information, call Matt at 864-9672 or 863-1929.