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Consensual Improv to perform at TACAW Saturday night, audience drives the entertainment

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By Jacqueline Reynolds Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

Consensual Improv is coming to The Arts Campus At Willits this Saturday night, and the Roaring Fork Valley-based comedy troupe is eager to laugh, play and improvise with the audience for another evening of authentic entertainment.

Founded in 2016 by Jeff Patterson and Corey Simpson, Consensual Improv has put on performances throughout the valley for over five years now, energizing local theaters and venues with improv games and audience interaction.

Nina Gabianelli, an original member of Consensual Improv and a long-time leading performer in the valley, describes the feeling of improvising onstage as "pure joy."

"It's a freeing type of experience for a performer, to just trust the art," Gabianelli said. "I don't have any cares in the world when I'm up on stage playing with my friends — I'm like a child."

Gabianelli, who is the vice



Jeff Patterson (left) and Ryan Honey (right) perform with Consensual Improv as part of Aspen Laugh Fest. Courtesy of Consensual Improv

president of education and programming at the Aspen Historical Society, has performed in numerous productions among many of the local theater companies, including Crystal Palace and Aspen Community Theatre.

When Patterson and Simpson brought forth the idea of putting together a professional improv troupe years ago, the experienced actress and singer said she initially hesitated, yet quickly found the craft of improv to be one of her most enjoyable and favorite performing outlets, if not "the favorite."

As one of the 12 members currently making up Consensual Improv, Gabianelli commented

on the group's generational diversity, stating that her fellow actors range from being in their early 20s to late 60s.

"We're not all old and we're not all young — we're not all anything," Gabianelli said. "That's what makes the performing group so rich."

TACAW Executive Director Ryan Honey — who is also a long-time member of Consensual Improv and will be performing in Saturday's show — praised the chemistry of the group composed of all local-valley actors and comedians.

Honey explained that while he "wears lots of different hats" in terms of his involvement within the valley's arts arena, Consensual Improv is his personal happy place of "laughter and play."

"Getting people together to laugh and be playful is what Consensual is all about," Honey said. "The only structure going into a show is the setlist; beyond that, we have no idea what will happen; it's what the audience gives us."

After years of calling Thunder River Theatre Company in Carbondale homebase for the troupe's comedic performances, Consensual Improv recently branched out as its own entity.

"We were able to do about four shows a year at Thunder River Theatre, and we're wanting to put on more shows than that," Honey said. "Thunder River was our home for quite a long time, and we still consider it our home theater."

Honey explained that the troupe plans to perform once a month in various venues throughout the valley. Following the show at TACAW this weekend, Consensual Improv is scheduled to perform in The Collective Snowmass Live Comedy Series on Wednesday, Jan. 26.

Embarking on this new journey of going independent, Gabianelli hopes to grow and travel outside of the valley to become "the best improv group in Colorado."

"None of us are paying our mortgage with this — it's extra fun and we enjoy finetuning a craft," Gabianelli said. "It's an art form. And the same as any other, you have to practice, and there are principles and rules."

With the primary rule being "yes," Gabianelli added, improv actors have to allow themselves to react, as opposed to driving a scene or skit.

"You never want to preplan what you're going to say when performing improv," Honey said. "The magic happens with the unknown."

The Consensual Improv team meets once a week, and these rehearsals involve honing different skills, like character development, in order to spontaneously apply them to games and scenes when the troupe hits the stage.

Gabianelli said that the shutdown of live performances throughout 2020 and into 2021 was shocking for their group. While they continued to meet throughout pandemic, the participating in Zoom workshops led by coaches in Los Angeles, Gabianelli pointed out that one essential member of the company was missing for

the last year and a half: the audience.

"Everything we do is driven by the audience, and that can come from anywhere and take us anywhere — that's the fun part and we're thrilled to have it back," she said. "I'm just grateful there's still an opportunity for us to perform and all have a laugh because I think we need it at such an odd time."

It is especially in these times, explains the local actress, that the disciplines of both comedy and improv are crucial aspects of humanity.

"Comedy is a way of healing, and when one person laughs, another person laughs — it's contagious, the spreading of joy," Gabianelli said. "And improvising is huge within people's lives outside of a performance setting — to walk into a situation without our guard up."

The Consensual Improv show at TACAW starts at 8 p.m. on Saturday, with doors opening at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$15 and can be purchased on the TACAW website. For more information about Consensual Improv and upcoming shows, visit theconsensual improv. com.