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In it for the laughs

A.C.E. takes its audience on a wild tour of Denver

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Even before A.C.E.'s "To Go" comedy show embarked from the Broadway light rail station at noon last Saturday, the show had begun. Linda Klein, Barbara Gehring, and Matthew Taylor pranced around the park-n-ride in safety-orange vests and pink tutus, asking five dollars from motorists for "ballet parking" in thick Russian accents. They even got one taker.

Clearly, this was going to be a wild ride.

It was the second time this comedy trio had taken their show onto the streets of Denver — literally. The show took its audience south to the brand new Evans light rail station, back up Broadway into the city, through City Park, and finally to Larimer Square. Along the way, the 40-person audience re-wrote and sang "Home on the Range," braved a Wild Tree Safari, got robbed by pirates, and laughed.

And laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

"We were all in the space program together: NASA," jokes Klein when asked how A.C.E. got together. She is the American in the group; Gehring is the Canadian and Taylor is the Englishman.

Hence the name, A.C.E.

"We have these three very different areas in which we grew up and which we were influenced by," Taylor says. "I think it's one of the things that makes our writing very interesting."

Klein, Gehring, and Taylor met about six years ago in the comedy troupe Head Games. In 1998, at the Aspen Comedy Festival, the three decided to audition with HBO there and got a great response. That

day, the group gelled and formed A.C.E.

It's been onward and upward ever since. The group now performs their own shows about once a month, with corporate and family shows in between. *Westword*



A.C.E. as the Biddies: Mabel, Mabel, and Mabel

rated A.C.E. the best comedy group in Denver for both 1999 and 2000, and the group received a five-star rating from the Winnipeg Fringe Theatre Festival.

"We sat and talked about what our goals were for this troupe," Gehring says, "and all of us were like, 'I'm done with the every Friday and Saturday improv show.' We'd been doing it for so many years, and that's what's really freeing for us now is doing the show knowing that we're committed to doing one show a month, but we can do whatever we want, wherever we want."

And she's not kidding about the "wherever" part.

"We'll create a show depending on the venue we get," she continues, "because we don't have a home venue. We prefer to

use all different venues, sometimes things that aren't venues — like the streets of Denver. That's where we really get our new ideas from."

A.C.E. did its first on-the-road show last year, and popular demand provoked them to put on another one. "We were sitting downtown one night," Klein says, "and something about the light rail came up. And I thought, That's a venue — there are seats."

The "To Go" show this year was an overwhelming success. As soon as the light rail started moving, Klein informed the group that they had two minutes to act out a novel. Someone shouted "Huckleberry Finn," and Klein and Gehring immediately jumped into an improvisation that eventually revealed the real truth behind Tom and Huck's relationship.

These first two minutes of the show demonstrate the way A.C.E. was somehow able to put together such a wildly entertaining trip — so much of it

depended on audience participation, improvisation, and luck. Members of the group would often disappear while the "tourists" were distracted, then return as different characters in full costume, leaving the audience wondering how they did it.

There was the bus crew — the ditzy stewardesses Vicki and Sharla, along with First Officer Chad Sparrow — who played the speeding bus scene from *Speed* as in-ride entertainment, then got everyone roused in a sing-a-long. Then there was Dr. Attenborough, the neurotic wildlife guide who showed the tourists how to correctly feed tree saplings without getting their hands bitten off. There were the pirates who hijacked the bus. And of course there were the fan-favorite Biddies, three old women named Mabel who sold the audience their watches and cell phones that had been stolen by the pirates.

On top of the entertainment, though, lay the fact that the audience was as much a part of the show as were the entertainers. Led by the A.C.E. Orchestra (violinist Jamie Krutz), the Audience Wrangler (Paul Orosz), and A.C.E.'s Head Chemist (Rob Orosz), the audience — wearing whistles around their necks, A.C.E. patches, and orange bandanas on their heads to identify themselves — turned just as many heads walking down the street as did the animated Taylor with his microphone.

The audience was treated to a free ice

cream bar at Ben & Jerry's and a beer at Rock Bottom Brewery for being such good sports.

"Live theater is not just going to see a play," Taylor says. "It can be a really exciting experience."

The members of A.C.E. can't picture themselves doing anything but comedy.

"It's been skyrocketing because there's nothing else in my heart," Klein says of the group's success. "I'm not longing to be a stewardess or a CEO."

"Since I was little I always wanted to be a trapeze artist," Gehring adds. "In this line of work, I can be one. Or if I want to be a flight attendant, I can be one. That's what's awesome — we create these characters sometimes based on our own fantasies of what we would love to do.

And here we are making money not really being this, but pretending to."

Taylor sums up the life of a comic wonderfully: "Somebody recently asked my daughter what daddy does for work," he says, "and she leaned to her friend and said, 'My daddy puts sandwiches on his head.'" He smiles. "Yeah, that's pretty much it."

But what makes A.C.E. such a strong comedic force is its willingness to take chances and push the envelope.

"People always ask us, 'How did you get RTD to let you do that?'" Klein says. The group mumbles and looks about, rolling their eyes.

"They haven't quite caught up with us yet," Taylor says with a smirk.

"We called our original show 'A Festival for the Senses,'" Taylor explains, "and the idea was that in theater, you rarely get challenged as an audience member. Certainly, you're always going to hear and you're always going to see, but you rarely smell or touch or taste."

Wait a minute — smell?

"We don't go up on stage and address all the senses, like 'What do you smell now?'" Klein says. "We just have a smell happening, something really pungent and memorable, so everybody knows exactly what they're smelling. But it's not necessarily addressed in the sketch or anything... Sometimes people walk out without even knowing that was part of the show."

"Bacon is our trademark smell," Gehring adds, "but we do others, too."



A.C.E. performs "In the Raw 3: Rawer Still" at The Subterranean Theatre / West End Tavern in Boulder, Friday, September 22, 8 p.m. For reservations call 303-399-6375. For more info check out www.TheACEshow.com.



Barbara Gehring, Linda Klein, and Matthew Taylor in their native habitat