



On June 19 and 20, Matthew Taylor, Linda Klein and Barbara Gehring will walk onto the Center for the Arts stage carrying...-nothing. No scripts, costumes or, hopefully, preconceived ideas.

"We have no idea where we'll go," Taylor said. "It's terrifying - and hugely fun."

Taylor, Klein and Gehring (a.k.a. A.C.E. Entertainment) will bring with them the rapid-fire brain synapses that have earned them a cult following in Denver/Boulder improv comedy circles. If their first half-dozen "In the Raw" performances give any clue, what will unfold will be a boggling comedic romp with the audience through thought-provoking hilarity and affectionately up-ended expectations.

"Forays of divine foolishness," Westword called A.C.E.'s performances. and the Rocky Mountain News described the trio as "sublimely funny...anarchically clever."

The three comedians (including Taylor, a former Crested Butte resident and Mountain Theatre alumnus) share deep friendship and respect, but their spark comes partly from their differences. Their respective nationalities - Klein the American, Gehring the Canadian and Taylor the Englishman; hence A.C.E. Entertainment - have spawned contrasting styles of humor. The result is like teaming up Bob Newhart, Monty Python and SCTV's Katherine O'Hara - smart, uproarious and unpredictable.

"We're very much a whole when it's the three of us," Klein said.

Having known each other from their years on the Denver/Boulder comedy circuit, the trio spontaneously teamed up for a 1998 HBO US Comedy Arts audition. ("When we caught their interest and they asked for our promo kit, we said, 'Sure' and ran across the street to Kinko's," Taylor recalled.) Inspired by their collaboration, the trio evolved and broadened their performances, from the Winnipeg Fringe Fest to Chicago's Second City to traveling Europe doing corporate comedy. They also consistently won top awards as the best (and, incidentally, only) act at their own Aspen Fringe Festival. Westword bestowed on them its "Best Comedy Improv Group" and "Best Comedy Revolution" awards.

A.C.E.'s out-of-the-box humor (incorporating oddball venues like bus trips and sensory stimuli like frying bacon smells) has also drawn an avid following. In January, the trio shot a pilot clip for a television series, a modern-day variety/comedy show with a live studio audience.

"They give you thinking-man's humor one minute, then turn around and do a silly sight gag; they're all over the planet," said Center for the Arts Director Pat Crow.

Initially, the trio's shows, like the one they performed in Crested Butte in 2001, involved improv built around set-ups with wigs, props and their popular pre-set characters. (Local fans might

remember the tutu-clad threesome offering them "ballet parking" in thick Russian accents outside the Center before their performance two years ago.)

But everything changed one day when Klein suggested that they not write their next show at all, but walk onto the stage completely blank and create the performance moment by moment with the participation of the audience.

"All of us felt sick; we were literally nauseous at the idea," Taylor said.

So they did it. And they loved it.

"In the Raw" performances quickly became Klein's favorite. "I love the intimacy with the audience; they're so much a part of the creativity."

Rather than stringing together a series of disconnected sketches or improv games, "In the Raw" shows tend to flow naturally from one comic segment to the next. It's not about one-liners or forced storylines, but about playing with various funny, silly, thought-provoking permutations on the truth. Multi-talented improv musician Jamie Krutz lends musical support, especially if "the show suddenly leaps into a song," Taylor said. The audience also plays a key role, spurring the comedians in new directions and using their imaginations to fill in details

- "like watching a mime or listening to a radio show," Klein said.

For Taylor, Gehring and Klein, the secret to generating fresh, wild comedy is in being very, very present.

"We embrace whatever moment we've created," Klein said, and Taylor added, "It's truly a great way to live, to accept everything, to say yes instead of no. There are no mistakes; some of our funniest stuff has come from 'mis-speaks.' Things like 'Club Scouts'; think where that could go. There's a huge amount of fun and love on the stage, and the audience picks up on that because they're an integral part of it."

A.C.E. shows are neither milquetoast nor vulgar or mean, "because that's not who we are," Taylor said. Their fans range from kids to senior citizens, and shows generally offer something for every comedic taste.

Diana Ralston, Center for the Arts program director, invited A.C.E. to bring "In the Raw" to Crested Butte. "At their improv workshop the last time they were here, I was amazed at the lightning-quick wit all three have," she said. "Presenting a show like 'In the Raw' is scary but at the same time it's exciting. I don't know what will happen. I just know it will be hilarious, creative and mind boggling."

"In the Raw" will begin at 8 p.m. June 19 and 20 at the Center for the Arts. Tickets are \$10 and will be available at the Center box office.