

# Groundlings at 30 a study in devolution of comedy

The founder of L.A.'s seminal comedy improv troupe laments the rise of meanness in our popular culture

By John Moore  
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**Los Angeles** — Gary Austin recently sat among a restless crowd at the 30th anniversary of the Groundlings and became an inadvertent witness, along with hundreds of others, to the awkward evolution, or perhaps devolution, of the American comic form since the 1970s.

In 1974, Austin founded L.A.'s legendary comedy theater troupe, which is now the primary pipeline into the cast of "Saturday Night Live." Its 264 alumni include Laraine Newman, Phil Hartman, Jon Lovitz, Will Ferrell and more than half of the current "SNL" cast.

The haphazard celebration was — what else? — improvised, with a loosely organized program of alumni-performed sketches divided into decades: 1970s, '80s and '90s.

The first segment was made up of gentle, quirky ensemble sketches such as one with a married couple out to dinner. When the husband's former lover approaches the table, his wife simply no longer exists. She paints makeup all over her face. No reaction. She finally unfastens her bra, pulls it out and dangles it between the two swooning former lovebirds. The distracted husband instinctively snatches the bra without looking at it and places it over his wife's shoulder, assuming it to be her shawl.

At the scene's climactic moment, "Harrison Ford" walks in, and the wife is forced to meet her favorite movie star while looking her absolute worst.

The sketch is an example of impeccable cooperative ensemble timing. Austin, who left the Groundlings in 1979, considers it a perfect sample of the best in American comedy in the 1970s.

In the second segment, Jon Lovitz revives his popular "SNL" Master Thespian character ("What is a thespian?" he asks rhetorically. "A lesbian with a lisp!"). Then the impeccable Ferrell emerges as late Chicago Cubs announcer Harry Caray to take unscripted questions from the crowd. ("What's heaven like?" "Oh, it's not bad. I share a dorm room with Jim Morrison. He doesn't sleep a lot.") These sketches are ludicrously funny, but the emphasis has clearly turned toward solo performers and the eccentric characters they have developed as personal vehicles for individual stardom.

And in the deadly third segment representing the 1990s and beyond, Chris Kattan parodies his father, Kip King, a Groundlings co-founder. The routine is not only snotty but lazy. Midway through his bit, Kattan actually pulls out a cheat sheet scribbled with the rest of his lines.

"I don't do memorization," he snaps at the crowd. It is a most telling moment. Here is Kattan, one of dozens who owe whatever fame they have to their Groundlings pedigree, petulantly telling a gala audience he can't be bothered to actually learn his routine. Worse, it's just not funny.

Comedy that once seemed smarter and gentler has become steeped in meanness wherever you look — on "SNL," "Mad TV" or Comedy Central.

"I'm very happy that you picked up on that, and I completely agree," said Austin. Ironically, so does current Groundlings executive director Krista Gano.

"I absolutely understand that it seems comedy is getting meaner," said Gano. "It feels like we are going toward comedy going for the easier laugh,

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In 1974, Gary Austin founded L.A.'s legendary comedy theater group the Groundlings, which continues to churn out talent for "Saturday Night Live."

**Getting slick in Fort Collins:** Groundlings founder Gary Austin will perform his play "Oil," about growing up in the Halliburton "family," to launch the Bas Bleu Theatre Company's 2004-05 season in August in Fort Collins. > 4F

# GROUNDLINGS: Once they joined for fun, but for some today it's strategy

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which is what the Groundlings have always prided themselves in not doing. The Groundlings have always prided themselves on really going for authentic characters and working the process and letting it be funny if it is funny, and not if it's not."

Austin's three favorite comics are Lenny Bruce, Bill Cosby and Richard Pryor because "they all were smart and they played to the highest intelligence of the audience," he said.

Young comedians now seem to feel they have to say something profane or shocking to get noticed.

"We live in a dumbed-down generation, and I think the culture has become stupid," said Austin. "There are a lot of reasons for that. One has to do with television sound bites. You've got to get in and get out fast. You can't develop things.

"Young audiences are also not being exposed to theater anymore, and so they are not willing to sit for two hours in a seat without drinking. It also has to do with a film industry that's aimed at the younger generation with material that is dumb and stupid and trashy. And all of this coincides with the decline and commercialization of radio.

"It's a lowest-common denominator mentality."

The Groundlings began humbly but now not only boasts a core company with several layers of designation, it runs an improv school that teaches 4,200 students a year. Thirty years ago, Laraine Newman

took a comedy class because she thought it would be fun, not because she had professional aspirations. Students come in today as part of a strategy.

"New students see us as a means to an end, and it's no fun to teach people who think our back door opens up into ('SNL' producer) Lorne Michaels' office," Gano said. "So managing expectations is definitely something we work on daily. Don't get me wrong. These are absolutely some of the most talented up-and-coming comedians, and I would never take that away from them. It's just not as authentic, and it's not as much fun.

"It's all so much more professional now, whereas when Gary started this company there was an absolute sweetness to it all. Anyone would love to have been a fly on the wall in those early years, simply because the passion and commitment it took them just to get it off the ground."

Austin has gradually been re-

pairing his relationship with the Groundlings since leaving in 1979, culminating in the gala held in his honor.

"It far surpassed my expectations, in a positive way," he said. "I just couldn't believe I was being treated that well, and so much attention was being paid to me. As dysfunctional and as not dysfunctional as we were, it's a family like any biological family, and that will always be true. No matter how alienated we become from each other, it's a family we can't escape, and until we die, we'll all be part of it."

Austin's favorite part of the performance was that early sketch highlighting the neglect-

ed wife. He said it speaks to the Groundlings' commitment to "truth in comedy" — how far can you exaggerate while holding onto the thread of common human experience?

"I love that the scene was a combination of two Groundlings styles in one," he said. "The husband and wife talking to one another is just a commentary on human behavior, but the wife putting on the makeup was classic burlesque. It was Lucille Ball and Carol Burnett. To have both of those elements in both scenes was very symbolic for me."

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