

Free Play

*THE DISTINCTLY
UNOFFICIAL IMPROV
COMEDY TROUPE
MY MOTHER'S FLEABAG
TURNED 20
THIS YEAR—SORT OF*

O'Connell House, a Welsh-Tudor mansion built in the 19th century as a private home for the Liggett family, of pharmaceutical fortune, is perhaps the stateliest building on the BC campus. It houses the graduate-student center and serves as the backdrop for the most elegant of undergraduate social events—the black-tie Breaking the Barriers faculty-student ball and the annual Middlemarch costume ball. One night a year, however, the mansion's Edwardian formality gives way to mayhem.

Students erect a makeshift stage in the reception hall, in front of the grand winged staircase leading to the balcony. Yelling, clapping,

BY ELIZABETH GEHRMAN PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEE PELLEGRINI

whistling, whooping, stomping kids pack the hall's enormous hardwood floor so densely that the cavernous space feels as close as a sauna, and alumni in the balcony fuel the frenzy until the decibel level becomes deafening.

For a select few, on this night a bond is cemented with a sort of Crazy Glue that even the solvent of Life After College may never remove. They are the improv-comedy paratroopers My Mother's Fleabag, and for them, this one wild night is the culmination of a year's hard play. It's their "Big Show."

This year's Big Show, on April Fool's weekend, was even bigger than usual, since it marked the "official" 20th anniversary of what is believed to be the longest-running college improv group in the country.

Using the word "official" in connection with Fleabag, as it's known to cognoscenti, is a stretch: Officially, the group does not exist. It has no academic adviser and is not university-sponsored. On the radar screen of the Office of the Dean of Student Development, which funds and oversees student groups, Fleabag is like an enemy plane buzzing the periphery of the no-fly zone—worth keeping an eye on, but not worth shooting down.

And Fleabag's history is decidedly informal, usually passed down at a party. Though memories of the early days have grown increasingly sketchy, dogged pursuit of a long chain of alumni finally yielded the Ur-Fleabagger, the group's founder and first director, Alison Martin '80. Now an actress working in Los Angeles, Martin says the group is more like 22 years old. "It had to have started in '78 or '79," she says, "because I did it once or twice, and I graduated in '80."

But what's a couple of years in the life of a legend?

Though every Big Show draws its share of screaming alumni—it's a Fleabag tradition to re-

turn annually until everyone you performed with has graduated—this spring dozens turned up, from as far away as San Francisco. And as the four men and five women of the troupe of 2000 prepared for the onslaught, they were well aware that the event would be part of Fleabag mythology for years to come.

Backstage Friday night, before the first of four weekend performances, elated Fleabaggers changed clothes and put on makeup, laughing, teasing, hugging, jumping up and down, socking one another on the shoulder now and again.

"I don't usually get butterflies," said Dan Zinn '03, a lanky freshman. "But all these alumni are coming, and they're going to be looking, like, Oh, these are the new people. Kind of looking us over to see how good we are. That makes me a little nervous."

Kristin Beckman '01 spoke faster than her slight New Orleans drawl normally allows. "I'm not really nervous," she said, "but I do think there's extra pressure because it's the 20th anniversary."

"Not really pressure," said Jill Amitrani '01, "but I want to do really well."

Brandon Hart '00, one of this year's codirectors, slouched in a wooden chair chewing on a pen and gazing at his feet. "And guys, speaking of pressure," he said, looking up. "Do you know how diamonds are made?"

For the uninitiated, a primer: My Mother's Fleabag is a small band of lunatic performers who take over the stage with no script in hand and create spur-of-the-moment comedy based on suggestions from the audience.

In a routine called "185," for example, the crowd is asked to fill in the blank in the following joke: "A



hundred and eighty-five *blanks* walk into a bar. The bartender says, ‘We don’t serve *blanks* here,’ and the *blanks* say. . . .”

Filling in the blank, of course, is the easy part. Filling in the punchline is what the Fleabaggers do, in such rapid succession it seems almost instinctual. “A hundred and eighty-five chopsticks walk into a bar. The bartender says, ‘We don’t serve chopsticks here,’ and the chopsticks say”

“ . . . Hey, that’s lo, mein.”

“ . . . Can’t you give us a little heart and soul?”

“ . . . Well, we’re going to go get our lawyer, and he’ll be suey.”

“ . . . Oh yeah? Fork you.”

“Five Things in Four Minutes” is charades on speed. But instead of book or movie titles, the audience supplies nonsensical phrases for two Fleabaggers to act out and one to guess—phrases like “Playing tiddledywinks with Tootie from *Facts of Life* at McElroy” and “Selling the women’s rugby team on eBay.”

Fleabag rehearsals are even more confusing. In a customized game of tag, for instance, you become “it” when you cannot think fast enough to come up with, say, “kinds of monsters” (answers like “dot-com” and “My father—just kidding” count). In “Sardines,” the inverse of hide-and-seek, one person hides and the others go look for him until eventually, the whole group is hiding. In “Variations,” an old wooden ladder becomes library shelves, a hopscotch game, a rowing shell, Shaquille O’Neal’s crutch.

But what looks like the random play of a renegade bunch of adult children is, in fact, anything but random.

“Improv is one of the oldest theater forms out there,” says Ron Jones, who was a Fleabagger from 1986 to 1990, and is now the director of Improv

Boston in Cambridge. In 15th-century Italy’s *comedia del arte*, he explains, an ensemble troupe of itinerant players would arrive in a town, learn what was going on, and play out the local issues. “It was wildly successful,” says Jones. “People would go to see it because it was their theater. Here are all these actors who are talking about our world, and it’s funny.”

Jones points out that though improv has a long theatrical tradition, its modern incarnation came about only in the past half century or so. It started with Viola Spolin, whom Jones calls “the grande dame of improv.” Spolin (1906–94) was a theater educator, director, and actress who served as the drama supervisor for the Chicago branch of the Works Progress Administration’s Recreational Project from 1939 to 1941. “Viola developed a bunch of games while working with WPA kids who came from very different cultures and often didn’t share a common language,” Jones says. “Her games helped them find their commonality.”

According to the Website for the Spolin Center, an improv training ground in North Bend, Washington, the exercises were later formalized into theater games, “simple, operational structures that transform complicated theater conventions and techniques into game forms. Each game is built upon a specific focus or technical problem, and . . . militates against the artifice of self-conscious acting.”

Spolin’s son, Paul Sills, began using her techniques with a little theater group he helped found in Chicago called Second City.

“The original cast included Elaine May and Mike Nichols,” says Jones. “And from that nut, improv troupes started popping up around the country, everyone using the same basic principles:

“It takes a certain amount of abandon,” says one former Fleabagger. Warm-up exercises include lining up on the floor and rolling over one another.





Every Big Show ends with a comic opera; this year, it was *Jurassic Park* sung to the tunes of '80s girl groups.

empowerment through personal theater and self-expression.” Second City went on to produce Dan Ackroyd, John Belushi, Ed Asner, Peter Boyle, Alan Arkin.

“The list is so thoroughly impressive,” says Jones, “that it makes you want to holler.”

Fleabaggers, like the WPA kids Viola Spolin worked with, come from very different cultural niches. Of this year’s troupe, Zinn, a future doctor, has the laid-back aspect of a surfer dude; the pretty and popular Beckman was a cheerleader in high school; Amitrani is a sensitive and idealistic human-development major; Courtney Chapman ’02 is a sharp, enthusiastic Connecticut preppy; Katy Brennan ’01, a brainy marketing and theater major, plans to finish college in three years; J. Casey Lane ’01 brings to mind a ruddy-cheeked good ol’ boy; and Christine Flynn ’00 is friendly, artsy, vaguely rebellious. They started as a disparate bunch and somehow crossed the boundaries of stereotype to

make Fleabag their primary college clique.

Nowhere are the kinds of attachments formed in the group more evident than in the relationship between Brandon Hart, a self-described smart-ass whose cool cynicism is reminiscent of “Friend” Chandler Bing’s, and Homer Marrs ’00, a live wire who comes off as sweet, trusting, and perhaps even a tad naive. The two, who say they never would have met but for Fleabag, have been roommates since sophomore year, despite what Hart calls their “very contrasting personalities and interests.”

Talking about their friendship before a February rehearsal in Gasson Hall, Marrs gushes: “Brandon’s just a big ray of sunshine in the form of a person. He’s just a hug waiting to happen.”

“Homer’s not,” Hart responds, suppressing a smile. “I can definitely say he adds nothing to the group. Or to life in general.”

“I’m definitely the louder of the two,” says Marrs. “I talk before I think.” When asked about his interests, he replies seriously, “poetry, guitar, improv.” He pauses, then adds, “Long walks on the beach and a man who cries.”

“WE BICKER BACK AND FORTH ALL THE TIME,” HART SAYS. “PEOPLE THINK WE’RE LIKE A MARRIED COUPLE. BUT NOT A HEALTHY MARRIED COUPLE.” “YEAH,” MARRS

That elicits a chuckle and a sidelong glance from ladies’ man Hart, who notes if it hadn’t been for Fleabag, “I would’ve hated you.”

“I would’ve hated you, too.” Big laugh.

“We bicker back and forth all the time,” Hart says. “People think we’re like a married couple. But not a healthy married couple.”

“Yeah,” Marris adds. “One that’s on the verge of divorce.”

“And Fleabag’s like our child.”

Watching the nine Fleabaggers rehearse—which they do at least six hours a week, and six hours a *night* the week before the Big Show—is like sitting in on a warm and fuzzy family reunion that periodically degenerates into a dysfunctional family counseling session. As Amitrani once put it, “I just came from [a class in] abnormal psychology, and now I’m living it.”

There are warm-up exercises and practice improv, all executed with giggly abandon. And there is the crucial task of writing the songs and working out the costumes for this year’s opera: *Jurassic Park* sung to the tunes of ’80s girl groups. But mostly there is a lot of seemingly irrelevant chatter and the kind of ribbing bordering on torment that often occurs between brothers and sisters.

And, like brothers and sisters, the group exhibits an easy physicality. Beckman curls up with her head on Marris’s chest; on the small couch beside them, in the same position, sit Lane—who, with Beckman, will direct next year—and Chapman. Or the six-foot-five-inch Marris does cartwheels around the room and Amitrani practices her karate kicks as Hart and Zinn mock-beat each other until Flynn breaks it up.

At some rehearsals it seems as though nothing productive at all is getting done. But that, it turns out, is precisely the point. “The preparation part is hanging out with your friends and getting to know how they’re going to react,” says Chapman.

“So you know who you click with,” Zinn adds. “You know, like, if I bring out Homer onstage it’s going to be a little more zany, and if I bring out Brandon he’ll be more sarcastic.”

ADDS. “ONE THAT’S ON THE VERGE OF DIVORCE.” “AND FLEABAG’S LIKE OUR CHILD.”

According to Beckman, “It’s about interacting with the group and relying on the other people in it to help you out if you get stuck. One of the most important things is learning your personal dynamic with each of the other people in the group. You have to know what someone’s going to say in the instant before they say it.”

One of Fleabag’s mottoes is “Trust plus energy equals excited queerness”—excited queerness being the goal of any improv stage performance. One alumna summed up that trust as the feeling that “you can look that person in the eye onstage and know they’re going to travel with you, that they’re not going to abandon you.”

But traveling together, in this case, entails not only supporting one another, but also building upon one another’s thoughts and actions until each improv coheres into a narrative that the audience can follow to its most illogical conclusion.

“It’s the study of ‘yes, and’-ing,” says Alison Martin, the original Fleabagger. “Those two words—‘yes, and’—are the basis of improv. And if you live your life like that, you’ll have a happier life. Because you’re in agreement with the world, and you’re also adding to it. Try it. Living with the motto ‘yes, and’ gives you things you cannot imagine.”

Perhaps the ultimate example of “yes, and” is Fleabag itself. “I can’t believe it’s still going on,” Martin says. Seven or eight years ago, when she received a phone call from a cast member telling her of the group’s continued existence, “I said to the guy, ‘You must be mistaken.’ I couldn’t even make sense of that. I said, ‘How could it go on

WHEN FLEABAG FOUNDER ALISON MARTIN ARRIVED AT BC IN THE MID-'70S, SHE HAD DREAMS OF DOING A SKETCH SHOW, BUT FOUND NO OUTLET. "THEY WOULDN'T LET YOU DO IT THROUGH THE THEATER DEPARTMENT," SHE SAYS, "BECAUSE THEY WERE DOING, LIKE, MOLIERE."

when none of us are there?' And then I realized it's not mine. It's its own thing."

When Martin, who majored in theater, arrived at BC in the mid-'70s—around the time *Saturday Night Live* was making its debut and Monty Python was becoming a household name—she had dreams of doing a sketch show, but found no outlet on campus. "They wouldn't let you do it through the theater department," she says, "because they were doing, like, Moliere."

Setting the tone for Fleabaggers to come, Martin forged ahead without official sanction, but with a little help from her friends.

"It was me and this kid named Barry, this red-haired guy who lived in O'Connell House," she says, "and a guy named Nick. And I said, Why don't we just do it in O'Connell House? Anyone who comes to the meeting can do it, and it'll be just all the loose, goofy, weird things we can do in an hour and a half." They placed a small classified ad in the school newspaper, and were astonished at the response.

"We thought no one would come," she says, "and it was huge. We got a great reception. Everyone just invited their friends, and by the second or third night O'Connell House was packed. The audience was screaming. It got so loud we all blew out our voices."

That first show might have been Fleabag's last, were it not for a very unfunny thing that happened the next year.

"One of the founding members died," says Martin. "Nick. It was terrible. That's why we did it the second year, for Nick."

Mary Timpany '83 also remembers the event as a turning point: "One of the reasons I wanted the group to continue was that after Nick died, we were all devastated. And once we had got one show past Nick's death, I think we really felt it just had to continue."

Perhaps part of the reason the Fleabaggers closed ranks after that tragedy, rather than disbanding, is that Nick was so representative of the kind of students the group attracted, and continues to attract.

"I think a lot of people in My Mother's Fleabag felt like outsiders," Martin says. "I know Nick felt like an outsider. I'm a professional actress now, and I felt like an outsider in a field I knew I was going to pursue. I think we were all really smart and funny in a different way. And when we did My Mother's Fleabag, all of a sudden we were accepted on some level."

Part of that acceptance, of course, comes in the form of the adulation of screaming fans. At shows in O'Connell House, each Fleabagger has his or her own cheering section, from which shouts of "Go Homer!" "Christine!" and "Yeah, Dan!" emanate. Students come armed with hand-drawn signs that say things like "Casey Lane rocks our world"; starstruck girls bat their eyelashes and whisper, "I think they're really cool" and hero-worshipping boys brag, "That's Homer. *I know him.*"

In groping for words to describe the feeling this gives them, Fleabaggers past

The goal is to be provocative—not tasteless. "One of the things we're told when we enter the group is that sex isn't funny," says Homer Marrs.





and present all revert to the same metaphor: “I need to have this drug called improv”; “It’s like getting injected with laughter heroin”; “It’s the crack cocaine of stage productions; you get addicted to laughs.”

“We get a unique high that comes from being onstage,” Marris says, “even if it only comes for a moment. All we did is walk out there and people were going nuts. We all share that, and it’s like we’re part of this really small collective, and those memories are really strong. The energy we feel onstage is something that carries over. It’s the kind of elation you don’t get from other friendships.”

Acceptance from the audience, however, appears to mean little in comparison with the acceptance of the group itself. These are people who arrive on the BC campus iconoclasts in a conformist world, and, according to several alumni, the kind of unconditional approval offered by the group—“Once a Fleabagger, always a Fleabagger” is another motto—can literally change their lives.

“I was kind of overwhelmed when I went to BC by the homogeneity,” says Amy Poehler ’93, a star of Comedy Central’s *Upright Citizens Brigade*. “I was surrounded by rich prep-school kids, and I didn’t come from that world. Fleabag was filled with the kind of strange and beautiful and crazy people who were different in all the right ways.”

Poehler and Improv Boston’s Ron Jones both say that many of their best friends to this day are former cast members. “We found in each other a way of moving through the world that gives us great joy,” Jones says. “Who wouldn’t want that in their lives all the time, and who wouldn’t want people in their lives who can give that to them all the time? I only chose to do Fleabag in response to needing an outlet for a lot of bad stuff that was going on. I can’t even fathom what my college experience would have been like had I gone somewhere else and not had to deal with the same things.”

Matt Tortoro ’99 is more specific: “After I got in, it really struck me: I am part of something that is greater than me. I had never met these guys before, but I just said, ‘Wow, this is my family.’”

“There’s a whole mental-health support group thing going on,” says Homer Marris. “Everyone has a different relationship with Fleabag. For me, it was a real turnaround at a hard time. I probably would’ve transferred if I didn’t get in, or gone abroad. I wasn’t very happy. I thought I was a big

loser before I got into Fleabag.” He pauses. “Now I still think I’m a big loser, but I have a hundred times the confidence in every part of my life.”

Jones, the historian, believes it goes back to Del Close, the “improv master guru” who studied with Viola Spolin and taught some of the biggest names to pass through Second City. “One thing Del Close was absolutely sold on was the concept of the group mind,” Jones says. “When we are doing this we’re doing this together. We essentially become one great big brain, and what it does for each of us as individuals is make us that many times smarter, that many times stronger, that many times more bold. It’s a world where you know you’re going to win, and you’re going to win because everyone there wants you to win.”

Alison Martin has a more spiritual take. “I bet it’s Nick,” she says. “There are all these stories about people that Fleabag has helped on an emotional level. I bet that has something to do with Nick looking down on them.”

The night of the Big Show, as the house lights dim and the spotlights brighten, Courtney Chapman has to shout to lasso the crowd’s attention. She’s leading the opening improv, “Standing, Sitting, Kneeling,” in which, as they enact the scene the audience has chosen for them, one of the three Fleabaggers onstage has to be standing, one sitting, and one kneeling at all times.

Simple enough. But at one point, early on, when Marris stands, Hart fails to kneel.

The audience jeers, throws things.

Still, Hart refuses to bend.

“*Why aren’t you kneeling?*” Marris finally yells. “You’re supposed to kneel!”

“Why should *I* kneel?” Hart shouts back. “*You* kneel!”

The air is thick with tension. You can practically hear the alumni wondering what’s gone wrong.

Then, suddenly, they notice Katy Brennan at the top of the stairs with a blaring boombox, and erupt with hysterical relief.

“What are you fighting for?” Brennan yells over the clamor.

“What are we *fighting* for?” Marris asks, looking incredulous. “We’re fighting for—”

“*MY MOTHER’S FLEABAG!*” they all shout.

Yes. And.