



Presenting the 9:55 Comedy Club: (from left) Michal Ketner, Jesse Jarvis, Irene Kuykendall, Betzi Hekman, Ray Bullock as Pooh Bear and David C. Wingfield

Is Something Funny Going On Here?

Richmond's mirth-makers go forth and multiply

By Harry Koffatz Jr.

There's plenty to laugh about in Richmond.

"It's possible now in Richmond to see comedy every single night," says Ray Bullock, who started the 9:55 Comedy Club. "That means for aspiring comedians, they can perform every night if they want. When we started, it was just us, five people, and then about seven years ago, Richmond Funny Bone came to Short Pump."

The recent history of Richmond comedy troupes is similar to Russian nesting dolls, and the largest of the group is **ComedySportz Improv** (comedysportzrichmond.com), a team-style independent franchise outfit started in 1996. The company endured a 2009 near-death experience that forced it from its home at the Dumbarton Square Shopping Center.

Christine Walters, who directed ComedySportz through its troubles, explains that the organization is now a business partnership.

"I was done doing the way we were doing it," she explains. "Now with five partners, [that] makes it a lot easier to juggle."

ComedySportz specializes in shows that adults can take their kids to, without feeling that they're at a kids' show. "You'll neither be embarrassed nor disappointed," Walters says. The group will do more of its extended programs, like an earlier "Musical Matrix" and "The Empire Rocks Back."

The near future will bring with it scripted, theatrical productions. There are also

workshops for both adults and school-age enthusiasts. "It's really great to take them to an improv class, but what you're really teaching them is communication skills. Just don't tell them."

Finally, Nigel Hines offers Spoken Word Blues Nights every second Thursday at 7:30 p.m. and fourth Friday at 10:30 p.m.

Katie Holcomb received some of her early training in ComedySportz. After departing from the troupe's original location, performers were without a home.

"Improvisees were on the street corners with signs," she says. "'Will work for a suggestion.' It was sad."

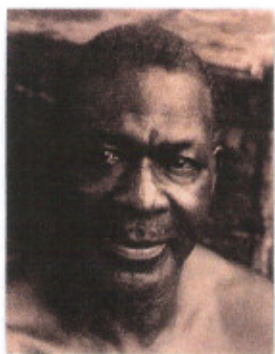
Out of distress came some new funny business, the **Richmond Comedy Coalition** (rvacomedy.com), featuring members who've been onstage together since the ComedySportz days. Their motto: "Live comedy. Dead serious."

"We wanted to create long-form improvised shows," Holcomb explains. "We put together a core of experienced performers, added guest acts, stand-ups, and →



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now we offer classes." They are held at the Carytown RCC Training Center, at 3324 W. Cary St. Instructors include RCC members Matt Newman and David Pijor.

RCC presents two themed shows a month at Gallery5 such as "In Your Facebook," which mines an audience member's Facebook page for comedy, and "Craig'sList," taking improv prompts from descriptions of items and services.

The **9:55 Comedy Club** (878-0918 or 955comedy.com) knows about surviving the long haul — having outlived its place of origin, Chetti's Cow & Clam in Shockoe Bottom. The owner didn't want the troupe's comedy act to start until the credits for *South Park* began rolling, hence the group's name. The company also had stints at Chugger's (now Cous Cous) and Easy Street (Sullivan's). Today, 9:55 is a regular feature at Bottoms Up Pizza, which has weathered floods and worse. It doesn't seem to be going anywhere.

"We've been there five years now," says Bullock, who when starting out performed with ComedySportz. The club books one professional show a month with headliners and a once-a-month open-mic night for amateurs and veterans. For the 13th anniversary show Feb. 11, comedians from all over the country who started on the 9:55 stage are returning. In April, 9:55

Nightlife Options *(A sampling of venues offering music, comedy and more)*

Ashland Coffee & Tea Café featuring live folk, bluegrass, "classical brunch" on Sundays. 100 N. Railroad Ave., Ashland, 798-1702 or ashlandcoffeeandtea.com.

Balliceaux Music and DJs. 203 N. Lombardy St., 355-3008 or balliceauxva.com.

Bellytimber Tavern DJs on Fridays, Saturdays and during the week. 1501 West Main St., 592-5592 or bellytimbertavern.com.

The Boathouse Two locations: Rocketts Landing in the East End and Sunday Park in Midlothian, which has live music on Fridays. Midlothian, 4602 Millridge Parkway, 744-2545. Rocketts Landing, 4708 E. Old Main St., 622-2628 or theboathouserichmond.com.

Café Diem Mondays, comedy; Tuesdays, DJ Williams Projekt; and an assortment of bluegrass, yacht and bar rock. 600 N Sheppard St., 353-2500 or cafediemrva.net.

The Camel From funk and jazz to metal and folk. Also sponsors a comedy night. 1621 W. Broad St., 353-4901 or thecamel.org.

Canal Club A venue for both local and regional bands. 1545 E. Cary St., 643-2582 or thecanalclub.com.

Capital Ale House's Downtown Music Hall Lengthy beer list, plus local and regional music. 623 E. Main St., 780-ALES or capitalalehouse.com.

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will host "Ladies Night," a showcase of women comedians, and this summer, Bullock plans a revival of the popular *Two Gentlemen of Lebowski* play as part of a *Big Lebowski* festival.

"Not bad for something me and [co-founder] Betzi Hekman were going to do for a few months before we left for New York," Bullock says. Hekman moved to Raleigh for several years but returned to Richmond and is also performing with West End Comedy, started by comedian and improv artist James Wasilewski.

He knocked around stages in Richmond and Florida. He started making them laugh about 15 years ago at Ashland's Randolph-Macon College in a group called Random Acts and somewhat later with the Take 5 group. "My wife, Rachel, told me, 'You know what you like and what you don't like. Why don't you form your own troupe?'"

In September 2010 **West End Comedy** (496-1714 or wecomed.com) began performing both family-friendly and "mature" shows at the HATTheatre and later at Richmond CenterStage's Rhythm Hall. "It was marvelous seeing our group's name on the marquee of that great new theater," Wasilewski says. (The next CenterStage show is March 16.) He draws a sharp distinction between the

two audiences: "Don't bring the kids to the mature show."

For something completely different, Johnny Heugel's "Midnight Suggestion" series, started above Steady Sounds, is moving to Strange Matter in March.

Heugel came to VCU in 1998. "And then I really fell in love with the city and never left," he says. He branched out from music promotion because he thought Richmond missed out on some good comedic talent. This evolved into the present monthly events, making for an intimate experience. He's brought in New York-based comedians such as Ben Kronberg and James Adomian, the latter known for his podcasts. Upcoming on March 15 is Kyle Kinan, seen on Comedy Central and *Conan*.

Social networking makes advertising easier, allowing comedians to instead concentrate on being funny instead of taping flyers to storefront windows. YouTube allows troupes to use scenes of their work as promotion. Meanwhile, there's a person who must stand before a microphone to face down the preternaturally unamused and, of course, hecklers.

"There are a lot of people who really want to do comedy," the RCC's Pijor says. "And they'll take any opportunity to do that. But it takes a lot of persistence." ☐

Cha-Cha's Cantina DJs, karaoke and dancing on the weekends. 1419 E. Cary St., 726-6296 or chachascantina.com.

City Dogs Full bar, hot dogs until 3 a.m. Friday and Saturday. 1309 W. Main St., 359-3647 and 1316 E. Cary St., 343-3647.

ComedySportz 8906-H West Broad St., Gold's Gym Plaza, comedysportzrichmond.com.

Cous Cous Karaoke, DJs and dance parties. 900 W. Franklin St., 358-0868 or couscous900.com.

Fallout Private alternative club. Limited entry. Underground comedy second and fourth Tuesday (membership not required). 117 N. 18th St., 464-8381 or subcultserver.com/fallout.

The Hat Factory Local, regional and national acts and the RVAation dance extravaganza. 140 Virginia St., 788-4281 or hatfactoryva.com.

Ipanema Café Bar open every night until 2 a.m., DJs bi-monthly. 917 W. Grace St., 213-0190 or ipaneamoveg.com.

Kingdom Live music venue located in historic Shockoe Bottom for punk, metal and alternative rock. 10 Walnut Alley, 344-4447 or kingdomrva.com.

The Lucky Buddha DJs and dancing. 1421 E. Cary St., 648-5100 or theluckybuddha.com.

The Mansion Room at Fielden's Members and guests only for most events at this after-hours club, but some parties are open. 2033 W. Broad St., 359-1963 or themansionroom.com.

Mars Bar DJs, karaoke, theme parties. 115 N. 18th St., 644-6277 or marsbarrestaurant.com.

McCormack's Irish Pub Local alternative and punk music. Stand-up comedy every other Wednesday. 12 N. 18th St., 648-1003.

The Mint Shockoe Bottom speakeasy, open after 11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays at Julep's New Southern Cuisine. 1719-21 E. Franklin St., 377-3968 or juleps.net.

Murphy's Law II Sports bar, billiards, Music some Saturday nights. 13995 Raised Antler Circle, 739-0800 or murphysbilliardsanddarts.com.

The National Live music by national and regional acts. General admission. 708 E. Broad St., 612-1900 or thenationalva.com.

9:55 Comedy Club 1700 Dock St., Bottoms Up Pizza, 878-0918, 955comedy.com.

Off The Hookah Belly dancing, fire-eating, juggling and comedy. 140 Virginia St., Suite 200, 225-1918 or offthehookahva.ning.com.

Richmond Funny Bone National comedy. 11800 W. Broad St., 521-8900 or richmondfunnybone.com.

The Republic A full lineup of DJs and live local bands of varying genres. 2053 W. Broad St., 592-4444 or therepublicrva.com.

Sticky Rice DJs, karaoke, bingo and trivia. 2232 W. Main St., 358-7870 or stickyricefan.com.

Siné Irish pub with live music. 1327 E. Cary St., 649-7767 or sineirishpub.com.

Strange Matter Alternative music, local and regional; comedy, DJs. 929 W. Grace St., 447-4763 or strangematterrva.com.

West End Comedy 1124 Westbriar Drive and Richmond CenterStage Rhythm Hall, 496-1714 or wecomed.com.

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