

# Funny Girls Girls Girls

TEAMWORK AND TUNING IN MAKES ALL-WOMAN MUSICAL IMPROV TROUPE SOAR

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As a performing artist, what do you do when your performance space accidentally gets double-booked and your audience is starting to get restless? For some, that might be just the formula for a cataclysmic meltdown. Instead, members of the Girls Girls Girls musical improv troupe won the audience over before the real show even got under way, by rallying together for an impromptu pre-show in the parking lot of the Arts on Real theater.

In the true spirit of improvisation, members of the musical improv troupe turned theatrical lemons into lemonade. With car headlights in place of stage lights, the troupe performed a varied set, including an improvised synchronized gypsy dance number, a country music ballad about beer and an all-hands a capella Christmas carol about men at the mall.

There was more to the pre-show than just song and dance, however. Several of the vignettes involved characters with stories to tell, such as the ghost roommate who stuck around to look after the only people she could call her friends. In another scene, a house full of children descended into chaos and song after being abandoned by their parents, left to be raised by

the television they all worshiped. The teamwork and camaraderie within the troupe was evident in the way they pulled together to give the audience what they came for: lots of



laughs and fun. What audience member wouldn't stick around for the main show, when the performers themselves were clearly having such a good time making things up as they went along?

The first incarnation of the collective now known as Girls Girls Girls formed around 2001 at The Hideout Theatre as an experimental off-shoot

of the Austin Theatresports troupe We Could Be Heroes. Founder Amy McCurdy gathered a group of women together to perform a few shows as Rock Star Girls Galactica 3000.

In order for scenes to seem natural on-stage, much of an improviser's character is actually endowed in the moment by their fellow performers. Members of the original all-woman cast were eager to move beyond the secretary, waitress and mother roles usually bestowed upon them in co-ed improv shows.

The first shows were enough of a hit – for both the performers and the audience – that the idea began to form of establishing a separate off-shoot troupe. Over time, the troupe graduated from performing short sketches to focusing on fully developed “long form” improvised musicals where a story unfolds over multiple scenes into a complete narrative.

Although founder McCurdy has since dropped out of the troupe and several other members have come and gone, original members Kacey Samiee and Shana Merlin continue to perform regularly.

While there may be no such thing as a typical improv show, each Girls Girls Girls performance usually includes a wide variety of music and dance numbers, which gradually build into a full-fledged improvised musical. Without the aid of props, special sets or fancy makeup, the troupe transports audiences to a world of make-believe for grownups.

At a recent performance, a unifying hint of pink in each performer's attire



was the only obvious special costuming or preplanning. Still, the troupe managed to weave an epic musical tale from only a few requested prompts from the audience. Asked for an era, a setting and a name for the show's protagonist, the audience offered the 1960s, a church and the name Austin. The musical then unfolded to detail



Girls Girls Girls are: (front row, left to right) Kacey Samiee, Annette Jurcevic, Shana Merlin, Tara White, Kimberly Tortorice, Shelly Miller, (second row, left to right) Jennifer Cargill, Julie Lucas, Monique Daviau, Andrea Young, Caitlin Sweet, (back row) Pat Buchta and Jon Guyton

the rise, fall and rebirth of a messianic girl named Austin. Think “Jesus Christ Superstar” or a modern-day “Life of Brian.” Not unlike Monty Python or Shakespearean theater, members of the troupe play male roles out of necessity and even transition between different characters within a given performance.

Initially a virginal and angelic poster child for the church, Austin's inner rebel begins to emerge during a number calling for “No more rules.” Mean-

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## GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS UPCOMING SHOWS

The Girls Girls Girls troupe performs regularly at the Arts on Real theater. Upcoming shows, all at 11 p.m. on Saturday nights: June 25, July 23, August 27, September 24, October 15 and November 19.

The troupe is also available for custom performances and workshops. For booking information, check the group's Web site, [www.ggg.austinimprov.com](http://www.ggg.austinimprov.com), which may also list additional appearances at festivals and other special events.

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while, the Girls Girls Girls band, featuring the troupe's only male members, channeled the 1960s band The Doors as soldiers on stage marched in lock-step shouting "We conform!" The allure of 1960s counter-culture and resulting scandal were enough to get Austin banished from her place of honor in the church.

Austin was not to be kept down, however, eventually rising again as the head of her own church. Before long, the popularity of Austin's sect attracted the attention of the Devil, who was soon singing the blues: "Austin makes 'em good, when I want 'em bad, and that makes the Devil real mad."

Eventually, the Devil took Austin away, but that, too, was only temporary. During the show's rousing finale, a resurrected Austin had the audience clapping along, while the performers spilled off of the stage and into the crowd as they sang and danced.

In a continuing quest to evolve and expand the group's repertoire, members of the troupe have been working hard on developing a new show concept, spoofing the VH1 documentary television show "Behind the Music." Titled "GGG: Beneath the Music," the show will follow the highs and lows of a fictitious band, complete with hit songs, big egos and sordid escapades.

Developing a new show format requires a great deal of creative trial and error, plus lots of practice. Improvisers often get asked if the shows really are made up on the spot and the answer is a definite yes; however, a lot of work goes into making that spontaneity possible. Just as with musical improvisation, a seamless performance requires hours and hours of study and practice.

Members of the troupe meet weekly to not only practice improvising, but also singing, dancing and music. The group has committees for each skill,

and members take turns planning and conducting rehearsals.

Improv rehearsals typically start out with a warm-up to help the group get focused and connected. At a recent rehearsal, the troupe began with an exercise called Movement Tag, where only one woman is allowed to move at a time, yet movement continues from one to another. It was clear from the beginning of the rehearsal that improv is all about tuning into and working together with the other members of the group.

Various other improv games follow, each centering on a different improvisational skill. In a game called Story, Story, Die, a director points at individual improvisers who must immediately tell

a story until the next person is signaled; the next member then must pick up the storytelling seamlessly where it left off. The exercise simultaneously develops storytelling skills, quick thinking and teamwork.

In addition to splitting up the rehearsal duties, various members handle marketing, Web site maintenance and managing the troupe's finances. The troupe has been submitting applications to a number of comedy festivals, with the goal of performing in at least one out-of-town festival this year.

To help stay on top of things, the group has evolved into a collective,



where decision-making is done by consensus and day-to-day responsibilities are shared. With all the behind-the-scenes tasks to handle, teamwork pays off off-stage as well as on.

Girls Girls Girls, to get more help with the workload and to bring new ideas into the mix, held its first auditions in February. Although the plan called for just one new member, the talent was overwhelming and four members were added.

According to Merlin, the benefits of forming an all-woman improv troupe boil down to "casting, control and comedy."

In terms of roles, "casting problems are much like an actress would experience in Hollywood. There aren't a lot of great parts written for women, especially women of diverse looks and body types," says Merlin. "When you play with only women, you can cast yourself as you like. You can play the hero, the villain, the sidekick or the

damsel in distress. It's up to you."

Because many actors hog the spotlight, especially in co-ed shows, improvisers often battle aggressively for time and space on-stage. In an all-female show, Merlin says, "you are forced to do this work yourself. Making strong choices and playing without fear is something we are constantly working on as a troupe. Playing with all women helps us exercise those muscles a little better."

Members of Girls Girls Girls also hope to "dispel the myth that women aren't funny," Merlin says. "You'd be surprised how many people think that, men and women alike. We are a consistently funny troupe – and we are all women."

Several members of the troupe chimed in on whom they admire in

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## LEARN TO IMPROVISE AND GET INVOLVED

Learning improv can open up a new way of seeing and interacting with the world. Among the many lessons to be gleaned from improv are learning to build trust, examine relationships and improve your overall communication skills. Who couldn't use a refresher on being positive, listening attentively and graciously accepting failure?

Shana Merlin, a founding member of Girls Girls Girls, teaches beginning and intermediate comedic improvisation classes through State Theatre School of Acting. For more information, visit the Paramount Theatre and State Theatre Company Web site, [www.austintheatre.org](http://www.austintheatre.org).

Merlin also offers custom group improv classes through her company, Merlin-Works, for businesses and other organizations interested in teambuilding and performance improvement. Visit [www.merlin-works.com](http://www.merlin-works.com) for more information.

In addition to learning improv, volunteers can help the troupe by working the box office before shows. Volunteers with technical theater backgrounds could run lights during performances.

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comedy. Several named "Saturday Night Live" head writer Tina Fey, whom they called "politically savvy," "fearless" and "engaging." Troupe members also praised Ellen DeGeneres and Sarah Silverman. Troupe member Julie Lucas added, "I admire any woman who sticks it out in comedy, for the amount of tenacity she has."

Performing improv also offers a wealth of benefits on a personal level. "Improv has helped me immeasurably in most of the aspects of my life," says Lucas. "There is a real high involved with leaping into the void, allowing my creativity to really flow, to channel the ideas in the ether. I think this kind of

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training can help anyone be more open to possibilities, to say 'yes' more than 'no,' to increase one's capacity to think on your feet and take risks. In our culture, failure isn't often encouraged, but in improv failure means you really took risks, flew high, tried new things."

Member Monique Daviau calls the troupe "my other family" and says that "they are great women, and I love being friends with them, too." As for the future, Daviau hopes the troupe continues to improve, "progressively getting better and better." There is little doubt of that wish coming true, given all the hard work and practice that members of the troupe put in. ★