



By Matthew Cole — Capital Gazette

A matter of laughing: New improv troupe hopes to humor local residents

By THERESA WINSLOW Staff Writer, Capital Gazette, Annapolis, MD | Posted: Sunday, July 1, 2012

Dann and Samantha Alagna's relationship has always been a lot of laughs.

They met in college when both belonged to an improv comedy troupe, then founded two groups of their own in Florida after they got married. The name of the original troupe is inscribed inside their wedding rings.

Now that they're living in Annapolis, they've formed another improvisational company. "We were young and funny," said Dann, who manages a staffing agency. "Now, we're old and funny."

The nine members of Free Range Improv will discover whether or not their material lays an egg at their first official performance July 20 in downtown Annapolis. The Alagnas are confident residents will find their debut comical.

"There's an enormous amount of talent in his area," Dann said. "(And) people love to laugh. We truly believe we'll be supported here."

Plus, added Samantha, there aren't many comedy groups in the area. "Right now, if you want anything like it, you have to go to Baltimore," she said.

Jeremy Black, owner of Federal House, said it was an easy decision to have Free Range perform at the restaurant. He knows the Alagnas well and already features stand-up comedy the last Wednesday of every month.

"It's something that sounds like it could be fun," Black said.

Free Range's name comes from the free-flowing nature of improv, where members take suggestions from the audience and run with them, or take part in a series of "games" such as explaining the world's worst reason to throw a party, or worst alibi.

Each member throws out wacky answers, such as these for the alibi:

"No. I couldn't have killed her. I was busy robbing her."

"No. I was busy driving a Ford Bronco. It couldn't have been me."

No subject is completely taboo, and some of the humor can be adult-oriented. "We adapt to the environment," Dann said.

Members of the troupe have to have well-honed funny bones to keep up with the frenetic pace. That's why they've been rehearsing for the past couple months.

But a little nervousness doesn't hurt. "Stage fright helps," Dann said. "It's the adrenaline."

Most of the members, who range in age from 19 to over 50, have acting experience, and a few have tried comedy before. But Amy Chase of Edgewater is entirely new to the stage.

Chase said she always made people laugh, so she figured she'd try out for the group. "I think everyone here was the funniest kid in the class," she said. "Sometimes, I feel sorry for Dann because we're all off on our own tangents."

For Chase, who handles marketing and development for a nonprofit that trains lab technicians, the laughter's been healing.

"It's like inexpensive therapy," she said. "You leave feeling 10 pounds lighter."

Pat Reynolds, a computer contractor from Baltimore, said the audience members feel the benefits, too.

"It's not saving the world," he said, "but for an hour you make their day."

Fun and games

The Alagnas worked on the Free Range Improv concept for about a year before forming the group in late April. About 25 people auditioned to be members.

As Dann likes to say, Free Range is “locally sourced, organically grown and certified funny.”

The troupe has been practicing and bonding at Colonial Players’ annex near the Annapolis Bowl.

Colonial offered the space because Free Range fit the theater’s mission of providing a variety of entertainment for the community, said Beth Terranova, Colonial’s production director. “I definitely think there is a niche to fill,” she said.

Terranova looked on last weekend as the members of Free Range showed off their skills. They started laughing simply by making eye contact during warm-ups.

“We all don’t like each other,” quipped Justin Puig of Baltimore, who works at Medieval Times as a server and supervisor.

Next, they began a series of games.

“Coming up with something new every time, it’s exciting,” said Tom Ryan of Bowie, who is also part of an improv troupe at Anne Arundel Community College. “There’s nothing you can do better for someone than make them laugh.”

Puig said it’s OK if people don’t find everything they do funny because it pushes them to get better.

He and Thomas Beheler of Annapolis, the youngest member of the troupe, looked carefree as they got into a variety of amusing poses. But they take comedy seriously.

“To me, humor comes from real-life situations,” said Beheler, a University of Maryland junior. “If you try and make something funny, it’s contrived. I don’t want to go for the cheap jokes.”