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Butch Ireland/Daily Nebraskan

The Class Acts (clockwise from left) are Juli Burney, Kevin Mattran, Mark Allen and Kathleen Good.

# 'Class Acts' improvisations keep comedy up to date

By Geoff McMurtry  
Staff Reporter

Onstage, Juli Burney is warming up the crowd with a few brief minutes of standup comedy, getting people in the mood for the work that's to be expected of them. There's something slightly odd about the floor-to-ceiling forested background behind her as she goes into her monologue about being proud of Lincoln for all it has to offer. She guides us around the circle tour, rides with us on LTS and urges us not to forget just how close we are to Wanek's of Crete.

Just offstage, the other members of the Class Acts comedy troupe — Mark Allen, Kathleen Good and Kevin Mattran — huddle offstage for last-minute contemplations of the first sketch — a family going to FarmAid. Class Acts is nothing if not up to date, dedicating last Saturday's performance to FarmAid III.

Burney is the booking agent for the Friday- and Saturday-night comedy shows at the Airport Holiday Inn lounge. Each weekend she brings in local openers and national acts. Burney is also a member of the improvisation group Class Acts, who perform one weekend a month in the lounge.

Seconds into the act, the crowd is laughing almost as hard as the group was earlier. Good has become a pubescent girl continually whining that she doesn't want to go if Bon Jovi isn't. Burney is the harried yet optimistic small-town housewife. Mattran is Dad — an acid casualty who thinks he's going back to Woodstock, and Allen is especially captivating as the snotty, obnoxious little brother. The sketch brings back startlingly realistic memories of ill-fated family vacations of the past, while at the same time it floats toward the surreal.

A later sketch features Allen in a reprise of the 10-year-old brat role, this time in a group of kids at the Nebraska State Fair. Good is a shy little girl this time, Allen is a tour guide who barely speaks English, and Burney is a horrible nightmare of the loud, obnoxious kid who always had to tag along with your sister and embarrassed everyone in sight. When they get to the petting zoo, several terrifyingly funny bits of audience participation are worked in. Pray it doesn't happen to you, but be thankful if it does.

Class Acts does two completely original, completely different 1½-hour shows a night. They do a few worked-out sketches and then take requests, giving the audience a chance at high-concept.

"We hope for real bizarre things, real off-the-wall places," says Burney. "We want a place from one side (of the room), people from the other."

"We all have different characters we do," she said. "We try to keep current, so people know what's going on."

"We also like to bring the audience in," Mattran said.

Class Acts has been performing as an improv troupe for three years, almost two in the current formation. All four have paying jobs — Burney teaches theater at Doane, Good teaches high school, Allen is a barber and Mattran sells men's clothes — but enjoy performing and getting people to laugh more than working.

All four have backgrounds in theater and comedy, or both, and all have done solo standup comedy before.

"Improv doesn't really fit into standup or theater, but works well with both," Burney said.

Mattran smiles, then explains some of the difficulties of asking for

audience requests.

"We don't usually do the pope, but we'll usually try to work everything in. There's just certain ones" that always crop up. Prostitutes, homosexuals, the pope, people that belong in the places . . .

"Sometimes it's difficult if we try to do current political . . . they don't know who the mayor of Lincoln is," Mattran said.

"We hate imitations," Good said. They all wearily say "Jim and Tammy" together, as if on cue.

"In the second show we play Improv Tag."

"It gets a lot racier, more risqué."

"There's a lot more sex jokes."

What's Improv Tag?

Two members become characters in a place. Every 30 seconds or so, another one runs onstage, taps one of them, freezing the action. Tapper trades places with tappee and starts off on a whole new situation. What started with a drunk guy's suggestion of UCLA cheerleaders in a dog pound (they made it work better than it should have) became a little girl in a mortuary thinking an erect cadaver was ice cream, which eventually led through a zoo, a porno photographer's studio and a store window with live nude mannequins. Or something like that.

It ends up having the surrealism of a videotape made while watching cable TV in a drunken stupor at 4 a.m. with a remote channel changer, but you laugh a lot more. Stay for the second show.

While Class Acts can only be seen about once a month at the Airport Holiday Inn's lounge, the motel has comedy acts there every weekend. There are usually two shows each on

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