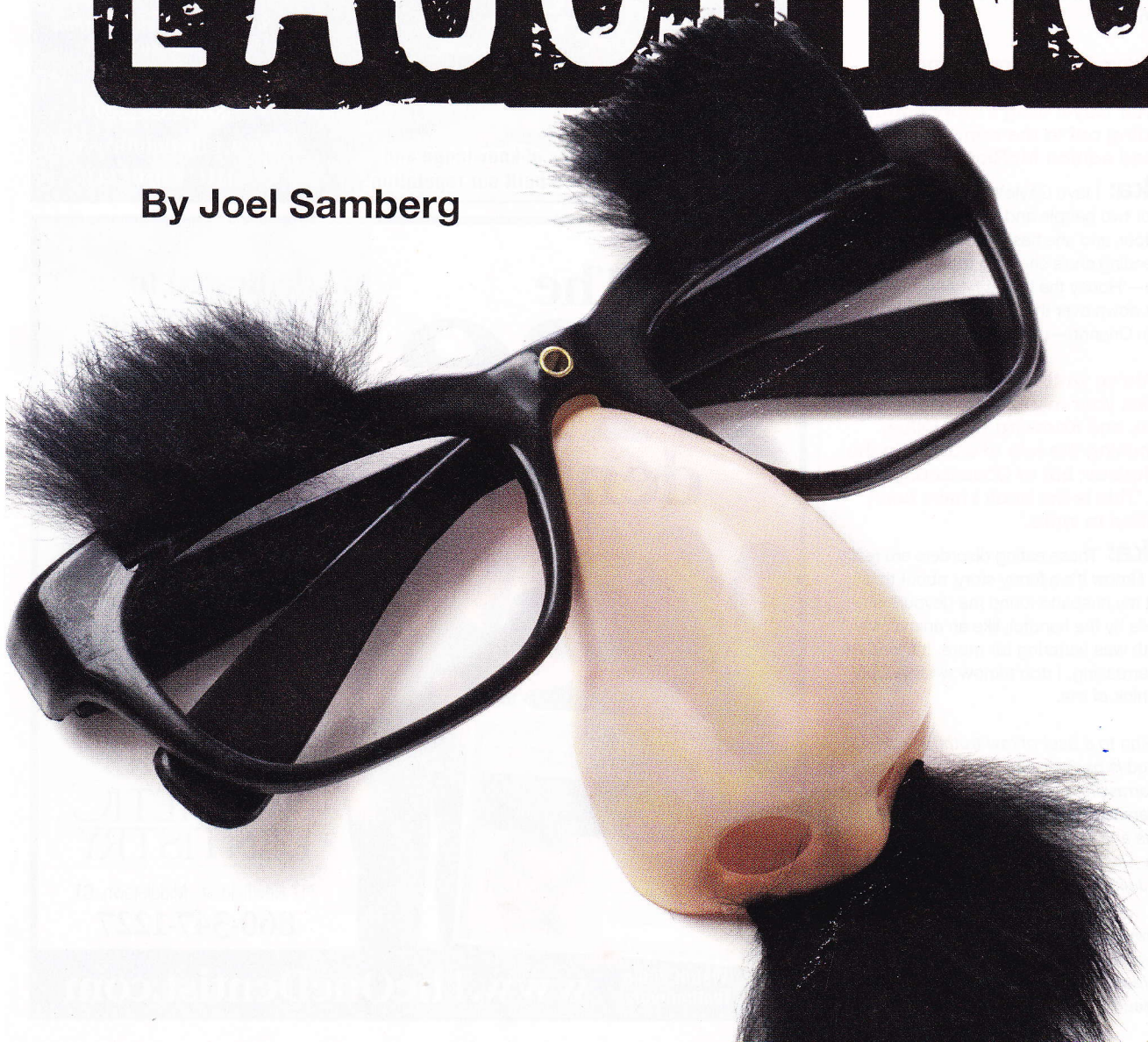


KEEP EM

LAUGHING

By Joel Samberg





From left: Ed Bassett, Rob Richnavsky and Ed Bassett in Phoenix Stage Company's *Every Christmas Ever Told*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHARON A. WILCOX

CL&P. Hartford on a Sunday night. Gas prices. They're all Connecticut stories that represent just the tip of a melting societal iceberg that's pretty big for such a small colony—and none of them are very funny. How, then, can one ever write a piece about comedy in the Nutmeg State?

The truth is, one can. Even two can, but I want to be the one to do it. Why? Because not long ago my wife and I were without heat and light for nine excruciating days. Because I couldn't find an open Dunkin' Donuts downtown last weekend when I desperately needed one. Because with the money I spend on gas each week I could run a senatorial campaign that rivals Linda McMahon's. It's all very frustrating, so it behooves me to find some solace in silliness, and writing an article about comedy in Connecticut may be the perfect solution.

I didn't think it would be difficult—and it wasn't. After all, this is the state that Mark Twain adopted as his own, a man whose remarkable wit and consummate satire made him a national treasure not just today, but during his own lifetime. And that was when you had to provide your own heat and light and commute by horse, neither of which was a barrel of laughs. So with that in mind, my journey began.

"The more I drink, the funnier Connecticut seems to get," says the Funky Monkey's Tracey Burrill—more of a quip than an earnest response to my question about just how funny the state really is. But what do you expect from someone who toils the comedy alleyways in search of ways to keep us laughing?

Tripling as a restaurant, art gallery and performance club, the Funky Monkey

in Cheshire is as well-regarded for fruit smoothies as it is for smooth jazz, as popular for black-and-white espressos as for colorful etchings, and as noted for grilled paninis as for the grilling of social conventions. That's because, in addition to standup comedy, the club also features music, poetry, storytelling and visual art. When it's comedy's turn, three or four acts appear during a single show, some of them locally or even nationally known, others trying their hands (and mouths) at comedy as a sideline to their regular professions.

"We are central Connecticut's only all-around arts cafe," Burrill says, noting that comedy is indeed an art. "The best comics have perfected a flow of delivery that triggers an almost involuntary spontaneous reaction. They're storytellers, often embellishing their own life experiences."

Moving on, I steeped myself in the talents of Sea Tea Improv, an improvisational and sketch comedy group based in Hartford. If their own life experiences are what drive these folks, then we must assume that some of them live in a world where paper cuts kill everyone and people give birth to cats. Those were two of the skits that flew out of their fertile minds during recent performances at Billings Forge in Hartford—skits born of a single word thrown out by audience members.

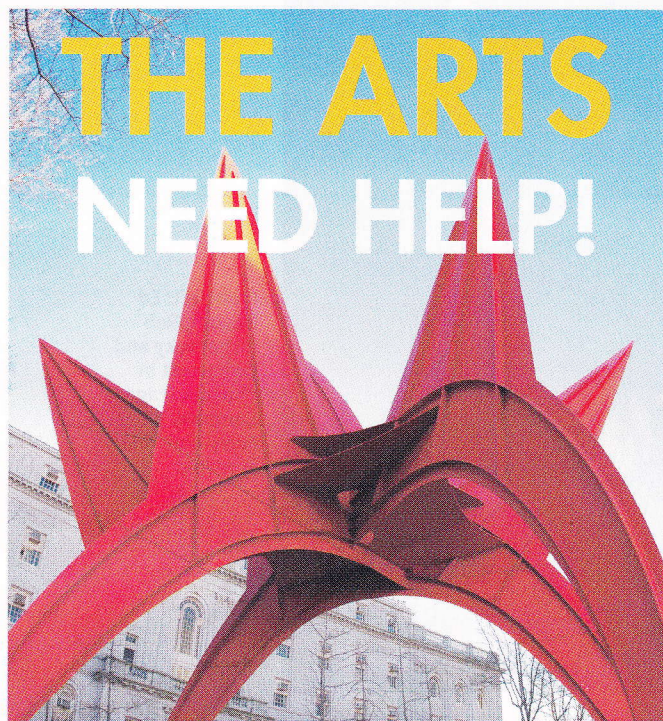
Sea Tea Improv also appears monthly at Hartford's City Steam Brewery, where they replicate the kind of quick-witted, rapid-paced games featured on the popular TV show *Who's Line Is It Anyway?*

The troupe has the energy and no-holds-barred fortitude reminiscent of similar groups in New York, such as the

Upright Citizens Brigade, and Boston, such as ImprovBoston. Which is why it should come as no surprise that many of its members studied or performed with both professional organizations. As their public relations coordinator Julia Pistell stresses, every show is completely different. "There's never a dull moment," she says. "We find the best improvisers out there and try to siphon their knowledge into our brains."

The next thing I did was to siphon some information from a brand new improv group called The Great Make Believe Society, founded in the fall of 2012 by Christopher Polack. They started as a group called BenTophor, with just Polack and Ben Lewis, and opened for Sea Tea Improv at Billings Forge. Now, however, they perform as headliners at The Buttonwood Tree Performing Arts and Cultural Center and at Oddfellows Playhouse, both in Middletown. "There are seven of us—including a beauty pageant winner, a machinist and a youth pastor," Polack explains. "Our signature piece is called 'Our Town,' in which we improvise a one-act play using suggestions from the audience. We portray several characters and create the entire town's history in just 20 minutes."

Speaking of towns, Treehouse Comedy Productions operates weekly comedy showcases in several: Cromwell, Trumbull and Uncasville, at the Mohegan Sun. In its early days, when it operated a single club in Westport, the comics featured were not nationally known, but their names—Rosie O'Donnell, Denis Leary, Tim Allen, Paula Poundstone, Jon Stewart—give a pretty good clue as to the skill of the Treehouse managers who booked these soon-to-be-famous



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acts. Then, as the Treehouse reputation grew, the roster started to include professionals who were *already* famous, such as Jay Leno, Robert Klein, Steven Wright and Jerry Seinfeld.

Brad Axelrod, president of Treehouse Comedy Productions, says that a successful comedy show, whether the headliner is an unknown or somebody with the status of Seinfeld, requires more than an empty stage, a microphone, a few chairs, yadda yadda yadda. "We roll our arms around all facets of a successful operation," he says. "We don't leave out any of the ingredients. It's not only about great talent, but also the correct staging, lighting, sound and sightlines, as well as the right marketing and promotion." For Treehouse, comedy is a serious business, and working extra hard may be tiring, but often gets Axelrod and his associates the last laugh.

Speaking of the last laugh, that was the original name of Brew Ha Ha, which at 25 years old is considered Hartford's original comedy club. It started in the basement eatery of the old Brown, Thomson & Co. department store on Main Street. But the 200-seat Brew Ha Ha is now inside of the City Steam Brewery Cafe, which gives it what general manager Conor Geary calls a unique atmosphere for a comedy club: "Downtown locale, a backstage that's quite literally a microbrewery, purple velvet curtain, intimate setting." In short, a distinctive club that takes its lineup seriously, seeking out the most professional and innovative comedy acts from around the country.

When asked if Connecticut is indeed as funny as the people who appear on his stage, Geary, like the comics who appear in his club, doesn't miss a beat: "Of course. Just look at that dangly thing hanging off the bottom left side of the state."

Comedy in Connecticut doesn't rely solely on monkeys that can be funky, seas full of funny teas, and brews that can make us go haha. Conventional theater also provides plenty of laughs, and so do some very funny entrepreneurs.

The Phoenix Stage Company in Naugatuck, for example,

puts on far more comedies than dramas. "Our audiences ask for it," says Ed Bassett, Phoenix's cofounder. "In the past we've staged serious works and classics, but that's not what they've told us they want." So instead of throwing a lot of cats up on hot tin roofs, they search the basement for some arsenic and old lace. Upcoming is *The Red Velvet Cake War* in June, billed as a Southern fried comedy; sketch comedy nights in October, and *Nuncrackers* in November and December, the madcap Christmas musical. "Hearing the laughter and seeing the audience leave the theater smiling and chatting about the show they've just seen is without a doubt the biggest payoff and proof that we've made the right choice," Bassett says.

The funny pros who aren't necessarily tied to specific clubs or theaters include Avon's Scott Rogers and Waterford's Jim Spinnato. Rogers, a Bill Clinton lookalike who, despite that (or maybe because of it), is also a very funny guy, began professionally impersonating the 42nd President of the United States in 2006, ever since giving Katie Couric a Presidential Pardon on TV both for switching networks and foisting too many hairstyles on an unsuspecting public. Rogers has been giving pardons ever since at shows and special events all over the region. Spinnato, Connecticut's premier comic hypnotist, puts people to sleep—on purpose. Appearing at college campuses, corporate events and comedy clubs, he is well-known for countless priceless bits, such as making some audience members think they are rock stars and others believe they are missing body parts.

All told, we probably have enough clubs, troupes, theaters and comedy entrepreneurs to keep everyone in Connecticut laughing for four months straight. And then we can start all over again, because even in improv, no one gives birth to a cat twice. Next time it might be a red velvet cake. 🍰

Visit www.hartfordmag.com for where to find laughs in Connecticut.