

Comedy

Whose anniversary is it anyway?



TROUBADOUR



She says 'impro', he says 'impro' Spontaneity Shoppers Deborah Frances White and Tom Salinsky

The Spontaneity Shop started ten years ago at the Troubadour. **Malcolm Hay** meets them as they return to their impro roots

On April 22 1997 Deborah Frances White and Tom Salinsky started a weekly comedy impro show in the basement of the Troubadour in Earl's Court. They'd first met at an improvisation workshop. 'In the first scene we did together we were Eskimos and we rubbed noses,' they recall. 'We started going out around the same time we formed our impro company. John Major was in power, the Spice Girls were cool and so was Britannia. In those days the Troubadour smelled slightly of damp. Or, as the owner put it, history. Bob Dylan and Billy Connolly both played there and the first editions of "Private Eye" were put together in the cafe.'

Within a couple of years the Troubadour residency was swapped for a regular impro night at the Canal Cafe Theatre. Frances White and Salinsky also began to work with actors who'd recently graduated from RADA. 'They didn't know better than to get mixed up types like us, who'd have them doing cabaret rather than Chekhov.'

At that point they were known as the Old Spontaneity Shop. 'Tom had originally created the name for a series of improvised Dickens shows which thankfully never materialised. We thought it was too good to waste. But we kept hearing that "old" was a very bad word to have associated with a funky young company. So, in 2000, we became the Spontaneity Shop.' Salinsky and Frances White are the artistic directors with Alex MacLaren as a full-time associate and around half a dozen core members of the group.

Since 2000, they've travelled the world as improvisers, most notably to the famous Chicago Improv Festival. They've played the Bloomsbury Theatre, Hackney Empire and just about every fringe venue in the city. Their show 'DreamDate', an improvised romantic comedy based on audience members' lives, has been made into a TV pilot by Geoff ('The Young Ones' and 'Little Britain') Posner. 'It's still not been made into a series,' they say. 'No one can understand why. Fremantle Media, who are behind "American Idol", have just bought it for the States.'

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They do corporate training for blue-chip companies. 'We teach investment bankers, lawyers, even TV professionals to be more creative, better presenters or more engaging storytellers.' They run workshops. They're developing a new TV format called 'You TV'. Salinsky appeared in Channel 4's 'Space Cadets'. Frances White will take 'Deborah Frances White's How to Get Almost Anyone to Sleep with You' to this year's Edinburgh Fringe. They've also been commissioned to write a book entitled 'The Definitive Guide to Improvisation'.

It's not all glory, though. 'We've had some diabolical shows where we've gone home cringing. The only thing is that, after ten years, the bad nights get better. You never slip below a certain standard. On nights when it's not easy, experienced improvisers can rely on technique

and the audience won't necessarily be able to tell. Inexperienced improvisers tend to panic and try to be clever and the show falls apart.'

On Saturday the Spontaneity Shop returns to the Troubadour for a tenth anniversary show and party. 'We'll take a walk down Amnesia Lane, accompanied by all the special guests we can think of.' It's likely to be a blast. But, as always with impro, something could go wrong. 'No matter,' they say. 'When you can laugh sincerely at a scene falling apart, and acknowledge it to the audience, it's like getting your black belt. It's kind of like sex. Sometimes it's easy, sometimes you have to work at it. But even when it's bad, it's good. You feel pleased with yourself for having done it.'

The Spontaneity Shop Anniversary Show is at the Troubadour this Saturday

April 25 - May 1 2007

Time Out