

Improv troupe sees life's humor

By BOB SADLER
SPECIAL WRITER

Doctor. Wife. Mother. Student. Homemaker. Stand-up comic. Leader of her own improvisational comedy troupe.

These are a few of the many hats worn by Dr. Cynthia Shelby-Lane, a woman who possesses boundless energy.

"I sleep and eat every other day," Shelby-Lane said during a rare break. "I slept yesterday. Today is my eating day."

By night, you will find Shelby-Lane at one of three hospitals where she works the midnight shift in the emergency room. At Detroit's Sinai and Riverview Hospitals or Pontiac's North Oakland Medical Center, the doctor deals with a gamut of medical problems from stab wounds and gunshots to heart attacks and strokes.

By day, you may find her at the mall buying the latest video game cartridge for her three children or perhaps jetting to Chicago for continuing classes in improvisational technique for "The Second City." Sometimes she'll fly to Los Angeles to gather more hours toward her degree in motion picture and television production at the UCLA film school.

Some evenings the past three years, the busy doctor has appeared on stage at local comedy clubs, trying out material on open-mike nights. But her true

COMEDY

comedic love is the improv troupe she formed two years ago.

"I was too scared to do comedy alone, so I decided to get a group around me," Shelby-Lane said.

Known as Girlfriend Village & Co., the troupe features a mix of black and white, male and female members and focuses on learning to deal with life through laughter and humor. Shelby-Lane draws on her Second City training, passes it on to her cast, and creates a show that would be familiar to fans of sketch-oriented shows such as "Saturday Night Live" or "In Living Color." The group first performed in 1991 at 1515 Broadway in Detroit. While the cast has changed often during the past two years, the focus remains the same — keep it edgy and funny while never doing the same show twice.

"I started with a group of mostly comedians, and now I've got a group of mostly actors and actresses," Shelby-Lane said.

Currently doing shows at Ferndale's Magic Bag Theatre, Girlfriend Village & Co. does sketches that focus on current events, including local news, Detroit mayoral candidate Dennis Archer and the Baby Jessica adoption battle were lampooned in a recent performance. Shelby-Lane's personal favorite involved her dressed up

as Tina Turner, complete with blonde wig and barely there dress accentuating the legs.

"We were belting out 'Proud Mary,'" Shelby-Lane recalled, "and Steve Mitchell (a Detroit comedian) comes up to me playing like he said he came to apologize for hitting me, but Tina and I end up arguing over how many times. The scene fades to black with everyone coming to blows."

"The show is good, clean fun, except for a few three- or four-letter words."

The talented doctor does not force leaving the medical profession. But working with an improv troupe and developing various film projects simultaneously could tip the balance someday.

"I try to be the best doctor I can be," Shelby-Lane said. "I knew in my heart when I was in college that I wanted to take care of people. Another part of my heart wanted to be on stage. I'm doing this (Girlfriend Village & Co.) because it's what I love to do. Some of the stuff I've learned here, I think actually makes me a better doctor. Laughter is crucial to your soul and your well-being."

Girlfriend Village & Co. performs 8 p.m. July 20, July 27 and Aug. 3 at the Magic Bag Theatre, on the east side of Woodward north of Nine Mile in Ferndale. Call 544-3030 for more information.

AT THE MIKE

■ No confessions, please ... He used his powerful position as gossip columnist for the Vatican newspaper to endorse ZZ Top for president in 1984. San Francisco Don Novello's alter ego, Fr. Guido Sarducci, makes the trek to Ann Arbor's Main Street Comedy Showcase for a one-night stand (perhaps a poor choice of words for a man of the cloth) this Saturday, July 17. Call 996-9020.

■ Bald is Beautiful ... He hails from Iowa, casts an intimidating presence and wears his head shaven. But Don Reese is one hilarious guy, once you get by the tough exterior. Catch his stage act at Chapin's West July 27 through Aug. 1. Call 533-8866 for reservations.

■ From the City of Big Shoulders ... Chicagoan Spike Mantion is a favorite of the MTV crowd. Check him out July 27 through Aug. 1 at Mark Ridley's Comedy Castle and see if he does his killer material on being a "fiance." Call 542-9900 for reservations.

■ Last But Not Least ... Don miss the Comedy Jam at Pine Knob Thursday, July 29. Tommy "In Living Colour" Davidson headlines along with Saturday Night Live's Kevin Nealon. It could make for an uproarious night. Tickets are at all Ticketmaster outlets or call 645-6666.

— Bob Sadler

Verve Pipe from page 3B

Brad Vander Ark attributes his brother's growth to drummer Don Brown. "Brian's been working with Don for a while. I think that has something to do with it. Don's extremely talented ... He's inspired Brian."

Brian Vander Ark agreed somewhat. "It's a bit different but it's not. There's more input from Don in my songs."

However, he said, songwriting has gotten easier for him. "The songs on the last record were written over a five-year period. Eight (of the new songs) were done in probably a year. Songs come a lot easier now," he said.

The new release, set to be in stores in October, will also showcase the band's new guitarist, A.J. Dunning, who moved from Cincinnati to play with the Verve Pipe. The group utilized home and strings to fill out its sound.

"It's a different style of playing ... There's more acoustic guitar. The songs are still pretty much upbeat," Brad Vander Ark said.

The Verve Pipe and Kiss Me

■ 'It's not quite as bad to compromise. The songs are more of a pleasure to listen to now. The melodies are sweeter. The writing is toned down. It's less pretentious, less dark.'

Brian Vander Ark
lead singer, songwriter

Screaming will play Friday, July 16, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. Call 996-8556 for more information. The group will also play Saturday, July 17, along with The Operatic 2 Ignorant From Earth, and Wally Pleasant during the birthday party for 89X DJ Kelly Brown at Lili's, 2330 Jacob, Hamtramck, (875-6555); and Wednesday, July 28, at Squeeze, 3370 W. Huron, Waterford. (682-8250).

SCREEN SCENE

A sampling of what's playing at alternative movie theaters across metro Detroit as reviewed by John Monaghan.

■ AMC ABBEY
1-75 at 14 Mile Road, Madison Heights. (\$8; \$2.95 twilight and matinee). Call 588-0881 for information and show times.

"Wide Sargasso Sea" (Australia — 1993). In this prequel to Brontë's "Jane Eyre" examines the story of the first Mrs. Rochester, referred to in the original book as the crazy woman in the attic. It shows the nature of her madness, as she meets and marries the stormy Rochester on a Jamaican island.

■ MAPLE THEATER
4135 W. Maple Road, Bloomfield Hills. Call 855-9500 for show times. (\$5-\$7.50; \$2.95 twilight).

"Much Ado About Nothing" (USA — 1993). Kenneth Branagh, the force behind "Henry V," returns to Shakespeare with this

delightful film adaptation of the popular comedy. Branagh, real-life wife Emma Thompson, Michael Keaton, Denzel Washington, and Keanu Reeves star.

■ MICHIGAN THEATRE
603 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor. Call 668-8397 for information and show times. (\$5; \$4 students/seniors).

"Fellini's Intervista" (Italy — 1989). Through July 13 (call for show times). This autobiographical "documentary" by Federico Fellini takes the viewer on a magical mystery tour of Cinecittà, the Roman movie studio where he made some of his greatest films.

"Wide Sargasso Sea" (Australia — 1993). Through July 15 (call for show times). See Abbey listing above.

"The Hunchback of Notre Dame" (USA — 1993). 5:30 p.m. July 14. Len Chaney Sr. stars as the bell-ringing Quasimodo in the silent film version of Victor Hugo's novel.

Collector remembers real-life 'Matinee'

By JOHN MONAGHAN
SPECIAL WRITER

In "Matinee," released on video last week, John Goodman plays a power producer who blows into a Florida town to premiere his big-budget epic "Mant." He wires the local theater with gizmos that bring the movie to life.

Don Gracchuck, a long-time art and pop culture collector, recognized the obvious tribute to William Castle, the '50s and '60s filmmaker known for his wild gimmicks. As a kid, Gracchuck was a card-carrying member of the William Castle Fan Club and has memorabilia-filled scrapbooks to prove it.

Gracchuck, flipping through yellowed pages in his Detroit home, hadn't looked at this stuff for over 20 years. But he'll never forget the midnight "world screenings" of Castle films at the Broadway Capitol, the downtown Detroit theater later known as the Grand Circus.

"I liked Castle's films especially because they were the scariest, but they were funny too," Gracchuck remembered. "All the great scary movies have humor in them. You have to have a little release

MOVIES

from the tension."

Castle's movie was 14 years old on Tuesday, Aug. 4, 1959, when he saw the "world premiere" of "The Tingler," probably the best of the Castle films. In it, Vincent Price plays a doctor who discovers a large, slug-like organism that attaches to your spine when you're really scared.

Price theorizes that you get a little tingle up your spine right before the creature snaps your back. Screaming your lungs out is the only way to destroy it. At one point, the film appears to break and the "Tingler," crawling shadow puppet-style across the screen, is loose in the theater.

Just in case the tingle didn't occur naturally, Castle rigged many of the seats with mild shock buzzers. He called this gimmick "Percepto."

He also gave each audience member an insurance policy (just in case they died of fright) and a penny-sized plastic disc. The instructions read: "As long as the magic disc glows in the dark, you are safe from the Tingler."

Of course, when the lights went

down, it stopped glowing about 20 minutes into the picture.

Castle arrived personally to rig the seats for the midnight "screamers." He mingled with the fans, many dressed up in monster costumes, during the "Tingler's Ball" which started at 10 p.m. Radio personality Dick Osgood also made a personal appearance.

The newspaper ads read, "Bring your date and watch her tingle."

Was Gracchuck dressed up like the vampire or wolfman that night? "I was lucky just to be there," he said. "My mom was really good about taking me to these things and all the 'Creature from the Black Lagoon' movies."

A few months previous, Gracchuck had seen his first Castle film, "The House on Haunted Hill," also starring Vincent Price. "The gimmick at the Broadway Capitol that night was 'Emergo,' which had flying plastic skeletons ride on pulleys over the heads of the audience," Gracchuck remembered.

When Castle arrived in Detroit, his plane would be greeted by a hundred adoring kids, many dressed as monsters. The public

relations gimmick, which usually ended up in the newspapers, was orchestrated by the Castle Fan Club as shown in a blue-inked mimeographed letter.

"Be there with the rest of the spooks," the letter read, alerting young horror fans that chartered buses would transport them from the theater to the Willow Run Airport.

Castle marked the end of his horror reign with "13 Ghosts" in 1960 (though he did go on to produce "Rosemary's Baby" later in the decade).

For fans like Gracchuck who grew up in the '50s, "Matinee" brought his hero back into the limelight. The Castle cult continues when "The Tingler" appears with horror movie host The Ghoul at Ferndale's Magic Bag Theatre on July 31.

Gracchuck will be there, this time without his mother.

If you have a comment for John Monaghan, call him at 953-2047, mailbox number 1866, on a Touch-Tone phone, or write him care of Street Scene, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36261 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI, 48150.

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