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Unusual Suspects improv troupe advances to national competition

Summary: The student group won first place in the regionals division of the Chicago Improv Festival.

(December 8, 2010)-The University of Minnesota, Morris student improv group “The Unusual Suspects” won first place in the regionals division of the Chicago Improv Festival held in Madison, Wisconsin.

The troupe was pitted against other groups from colleges around the upper Midwest and were the only group from Minnesota.

“There were eight troupes in our regional, which was split into two sets of four,” explains Unusual Suspects co-chair Alex McGreavey ’10, Maple Grove. “We competed in the second set and took first place. We then competed against the first place winner from the first set as well as a wild card from either set. We won first place in regionals and came home with a nice big plaque!”

Though spontaneity is the essence of improvisation, the skill and ease with which The Unusual Suspects perform isn’t random. The group uses every Monday night from 9:30 until 11 p.m. to practice their form.

“We also all attend Improv Club every Wednesday night from 9:30 until 11 p.m., where we can relax and play with anyone who wants to play!” adds McGreavey. “And we have our shows, which always have great crowds. This allows us to practice in front of an audience which really helps—it’s a much different dynamic.”

Such practice and dedication helped the group during regionals. Judges for the competition were three professionals who all taught improv at the Chicago branch of The Second City, a theatre and school specializing in sketch comedy and improvisation for more than fifty years. Troupes were judged based on their ability to agree with one another, to always accept what is going on, and the degree of playfulness in the performance.

“Listening and acceptance are important because if two improvers on stage are fighting for creative control in a scene, the scene is terrible. So this is what we really decided to focus on as a group [during practice],” says troupe co-chair Sam Krump-Johnson ’10, Maple Grove.

“The judges approached us afterward to express how impressed they were that we didn’t have a faculty coach—we just do it ourselves!” says McGreavey. “On our feedback sheets, we got comment after comment saying that our performance was refreshing and that they love that it was obvious that we were having a blast.”

Fellow member Alex Kies, St. Paul, agrees with the importance of functioning well as a team, listening and supporting each other. “Improvisation isn’t about making people laugh or being the funniest person in the room. Improvisation is about being part of a group and making everyone around you look good—which apparently we did pretty well.”

In addition to liking how well the troupe performed together, the judges were especially impressed with the new form of

improv The Unusual Suspects developed called “the Harken.”

“It is a form that fuses two forms of improv, long form and short form, into one,” explains Krump-Johnson. “It’s a really fun game because it give you all the spontaneity of playing short form games, mixed with the character and plot of long form games. We obviously had no idea what we had on our hands, because we didn’t even think we would make it past the first round. But the judges were incredibly impressed, for some reason, and a lot of it was our game. They said they had never seen anything like it before.”

Winning the CIT Regionals was a great honor for the troupe, allowing them to see the value and importance of what they do outside the context of Morris.

“To go out into the Big 10 and show them how it’s done is a thrilling experience,” says Kies. “Furthermore, to get the feedback that we got was monumental. It was truly one of the most humbling experiences of my college career.”

“The fact that we are a completely student-run troupe makes winning that much more wonderful! We learn from each other and it was great to hear from outsiders that this showed,” says McGreavey. “To get out there and compete at the same level with schools that have ready access to comedy clubs, improv workshops, and professional coaching is an extremely good feeling.”

“[Winning] has given us a whole new energy to do improv. Not only that, but to be seen as innovators in the eyes of people that are professionals in the industry, it’s a dream come true,” says Krump-Johnson. “All of our hard work has been validated, and we are ready to do more to get ready for nationals!”

Interestingly, the Unusual Suspects were one of a slew of smaller universities who triumphed at the CIT Regionals. CIT Assistant Producer Keith Habersberger has said, “It’s been interesting to see that until Captain Soldier from NYU won the East Regional, all the other regionals from this year were won by teams from smaller universities, state schools, or colleges. I’m not quite sure why that is, but maybe building and developing team community is easier in a smaller university.”

The troupe will move on to compete in nationals on Saturday, February 26, 2010, in Chicago. The performance will be streamed live online. For any and all interested in viewing, information will be given at a later date. Finals will consist of each regional winner as well as one wild card from any region, making Unusual Suspects one of eleven troupes competing at nationals.

The Unusual Suspects is comprised of co-chairs McGreavey and Krump-Johnson, Improv Club co-chairs Jessie Sherman, and Michelle Bohacek, Kies, Alek Sievert, Jessie Hennen, Cormac Strahan, Andrew Sletten, Will Hanson, and Isaac Deragon.

To watch the Unusual Suspects at regionals, visit the [Chicago Improv Festival website](#).

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