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Comedy finds a home at Chicken Pie Diner

By Pat Sherman
TODAY'S LOCAL NEWS

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SAN MARCOS - Budding San Marcos comedian Zoltan Kaszas recalled testing his comedic mettle last year for the first time, at the Comedy Co-op in Sorrento Valley.

"They were brutal," recalled Kaszas, 20. "If I was up there for six or seven minutes, I'd be lucky if I got one or two laughs."

Today, the laughs flow easily. Kaszas and other local comedians are honing their craft while observing established Hollywood humorists at a new weekly Comedy Nite.

Performances are at 8:30 p.m. Wednesdays at the Chicken Pie Diner and Filling Station, 1020 W. San Marcos Blvd. in San Marcos' Restaurant Row.

Professional comedian and promoter Tony Scaduto approached owner Arthur Pearl with the concept, which combines professional stand-up comedians and aspiring local talent such as Kaszas.

"The younger, fresher newbies are always interesting," Pearl said. "Sometimes they're funny, sometimes they're not, (but) we rarely put someone up there who has not honed their skills in some sort of a comedy venue."

Local performers open the show, followed by a headliner.

Last month's lineup included Jimmy Brogan, a former writer and talent coordinator for "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno."

On Wednesday, Dan Barton of "E!" television's "Talk Soup" and "An Evening at the Improv" will perform. On Aug. 15, Cowboy Risky Betts will bring his Western Comedy to San Marcos. Scaduto will be the master of ceremonies.

Kyle Smith, 21, also got his start last year at the Comedy Co-op, a venue where comedians younger than 21 can get experience outside a bar setting.

To increase their chances of landing a gig with no name recognition, Smith and fellow Chicken Pie regulars Kaszas and Stuart Swanson formed the Boy Band of Comedy.

"It was a bunch of upstart young comedians," Kaszas explained. "We had a really hard time getting gigs, ... so we decided to band together. It's been really paying off for us."

Smith recently performed his 100th show, appearing at places such as the La Jolla Comedy Store and the Ice House Comedy Club in Pasadena. His influences range from Demetri Martin and Daniel Tosh to Robin Williams. To mix up his routine, Smith adds guitar.

“My closing bit is a pseudo-song called, 'Some Jokes are Funnier When You Tell Them to Music,' ” he said.

Smith offered an example of a bit best accompanied by guitar strumming: “I saw a woman playing the accordion the other day, and I thought to myself, 'Wow, the only thing more attractive than a woman playing an accordion is a woman doing anything else.’”

Kaszas said he finds comic mileage in everyday life, such as family and relationship problems.

“I don't have a limit to how personal I get,” Kaszas said. “(Audiences) can tell if you're pulling one over on them, but if you're being honest they relate to that. In the beginning, I was really nervous on stage, but I wasn't being myself. I was trying to imitate other comedians I had seen on TV.”

A graduate of San Marcos High, Smith said peppering his routine with local references gives him a leg up on his competition.

He has yet to mention any former teachers in his routine.

“I don't have any jokes about my old teachers, so I'd be happy if they came out,” Smith said, with a laugh.

Schoolteachers and parents alike might appreciate the venue's policy of discouraging profanity.

“We caution the comics about not dropping too many F-bombs,” Pearl said. “We like to call it 'no foul humor' because we are a chicken place.”

Oceanside resident Ibo Brewer began honing his comedy routine while serving in the Marines.

Three years ago, on the advice of comedian Vicki Barbolak, he took a chance and tried out at the La Jolla Comedy Store.

His first joke was about the white lies people tell when they coo over ugly babies.

Though his first material was improvised, Brewer has since written his own show, during which he assumes the character of “Dirty Dave,” a composite based on exchanges between the Southern blacks and the whites he served with in the military. The cultural disconnect he observed fuels the comedy.

“I just thought they were a hilarious group of people – the people from corporate world ... and the people from the 'Dirty South,' ” said Brewer, 27.

For example, in an episode Brewer taped for comedytime.tv, a man advised his co-worker to walk over and “holla” at an attractive woman (meaning to express his romantic interest). Instead, the man walked over and started screaming at the woman.

“He gets it all twisted in his head, and he goes over and yells at her and she maces him,” Brewer said. “In my experience, I find it's always funny when somebody gets maced.”

While making the socially inept might have its appeal, Naveed Mahbub prefers a more socially conscious brand of humor, touching on everything from globalization to the conflict in the Middle East. The Rancho Peñasquitos resident opens the show Wednesday night.

A native of Bangladesh, Mahbub got his start telling jokes in Bengali to family and friends. He decided to try his hand at comedy in English after coming to the United States to attend the University of Michigan.

“I found out I was able to translate a lot of humor into English ... among my college friends or my co-workers,” Mahbub said. “I found I actually had some advantage because I’m new to this culture and I was seeing America from a different angle.”

Mahbub took a comedy course with Sandy Shore (sister of comedian Pauly Shore) at the Comedy Club in La Jolla.

“At the end of the eight weeks, I had to do a showcase in front of a live audience, which I did, and I sucked, but ... I've been going to open-mikes and trying to improve myself.”

The practice has paid off. Mahbub nabbed the Best Male Comic title at the Play Vegas Stage at this year's Las Vegas Comedy Festival.

Through the use of observational self-derisive humor, Mahbub hopes to expose people to a different side of issues they might not otherwise consider, such as outsourcing, arranged marriages and his Muslim faith.

“I start by saying, 'I'm here as a comedian because comedy is now being outsourced,' and it gets me a laugh. “Then I say, 'Guess what? I have a University of Michigan engineering degree and my job as an engineer just got outsourced out to India.' ... There is actually some truth in there, because I’m working with this company and everything is in Southeast Asia. I’m the sole person here in the U.S., but I’m seeing a shift of responsibility away from me.”

Mahbub said he also hopes to debunk stereotypes about Muslims.

“I always chat with the audience at the end,” he said. “I stand at the door as they're going out, and a lot of them have said, 'You're funny, but I actually learned something.' ”

Naturally, hecklers never seem to learn. Smith said his approach is to ignore them.

“I'm not as much of a crowd worker,” Smith said. “Zoltan is, like, the king. He's good at getting back in their face.”

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Comedy Nite in San Marcos

When: 8:30 p.m. Wednesdays

Where: Chicken Pie Diner and Filling Station, 1020 W. San Marcos Blvd., San Marcos

Cost: \$5 Information: (760) 591-9393 or www.chickenpiediner.com