

Bearded Men Improv gains recognition

“Beards of a feather”

By: [J. Shane Mercer](#), INFORUM



Given their name, the Bearded Men Improv group really doesn't have that much facial hair. The Fargo-Moorhead-based group performs regularly at Babb's Coffee House on Main Avenue in Fargo. Photo: **Jenny M Christen**



Joe Rapp, left, and Matthew Pitner, members of Bearded Men Improv, are pictured as their “Grannies” characters. Photo: **Jenny M Christen**

Three quirky old ladies met at Babb's Coffee House in Fargo a couple of Thursdays ago, but when the discussion got testy, the scene got ugly.

“Whatever! I'll go sit in the living room without you!” Dorothy said, exiting in a huff.

“It's funny,” Vivian said glibly. “She always thinks it's a punishment when she leaves the room.”

And the room laughed as an audience was on hand to see the Bearded Men Improv group perform at one of its regular Babb's gigs.

The “scene” was part of the group's never-the-same-show-twice improv skit “Grannies,” which the “Grannies” make up as they go.

That on-the-fly motif is pretty much the modus operandi for this troupe of 10 men (who, incidentally, are not nearly as facially hairy as the name would imply). And it's getting rave reviews.

“I know I couldn’t do what they do – just getting up there and making everybody laugh,” says North Dakota State University history major Molly Dirkach, 22.

“They’re so funny, and they’re different every time,” says Concordia College student Paige Kamrath, 20.

“I haven’t laughed like that for a while,” says Moorhead resident William Guin, 22.

Of course, the troupe does more than pretend to be funny old ladies. For example, Bearded Men also has its “Town Council” setup in which members play characters in a city that has to deal with whatever problems happen to come up during the skit. On this particular Thursday, they were in Romania, where there was a foul stench and vampires.

The long-form improv (such as “Grannies” and “Town Council”) is “fun because we’re creating basically a brand new play on stage,” says Joe Rapp, the group’s managing director.

The roots of BMI dig deeply into the soil of Minnesota State University Moorhead, where the group formed in 2006. Rapp, then an MSUM student, along with college mates Matthew Pitner and Joshua Stenseth, had worked with another improv group, which, Rapp says “had kind of started to fall apart.”

They put up some posters inviting people to take part in what you might call an improv jam – something like the show “Whose Line Is It Anyway?”

Scores of people showed up, the meetings continued, and several of those who attended eventually became part of the act.

“The way it turned into a business probably wasn’t planned for,” Rapp says.

Intended or not, a business is just what it became with Rapp, artistic director Pitner and director of training Stenseth owning the company.

Their resume continues to grow. They perform at MSUM and do corporate gigs and high school workshops. They performed at the Fire Hall Theatre in Grand Forks earlier this year, and they have gigs coming up in Minot. They’re also performing at the Twin Cities Improv Festival in June.

They’ll work for “anybody that wants us, who is willing to pay for our gas, give us a little money, keep us happy – we’ll go there,” says Pitner, who showed up to our interview wearing a TGI Friday’s name tag that read “Darth Vader.”

The Bearded Men’s most consistent gig is Babb’s, where they perform every first, third and fifth Thursday (if it exists) of the month at Babb’s.

But April 16, they’ll have to miss their normal Babb’s show. Despite the relative newness of the group, it has earned the chance to perform at the Chicago Improv Festival that week.

“It makes us feel good that literally only after like two and a half years, we’re already performing at the Chicago Improv Festival,” Rapp says. “I mean, that’s a big honor to us, and that makes us feel good that we know that we’ve been moving at a right direction and at a rate that’s unbelievable to me a lot of times.”

Even though the group’s ranks have grown to 10, the three founders still perform with the troupe.

“I’d say within six months of the group starting, improv becomes in some ways like an addiction,” Rapp says. “It was a severe passion. ... I honestly can’t imagine not being able to have Bearded Men or improv in some way be able to be part of my life.”

For Pitner, improv is a thrill.

“Some people jump off of mountains, some people jump off of buildings, some people jump off of bridges. I get a thrill from stepping up on stage and not having any clue what ... I’m going to say,” Pitner says. “And I love it. I love it.”