



## **REVIEW: Valentine's Day Show**

by Ed, *The Bay Area Critic*, February 15, 2007

Last night we went to BATS Improv in San Francisco's Fort Mason Center. BATS Improv is a non-profit education and performance theatre company that has been entertaining Bay Area audiences since 1986. Their unique style of acting-based improvisational theatre has made BATS Northern California's largest improv theatre company and school and is a benchmark for improv all over the world.

BATS performs year-round at the 200-seat Bayfront Theater, which is the ideal size venue for this type of thing – intimate and personal. You feel like the improvisational actors are performing just for you in your living room. Some comedy clubs are so big and spread out that you end up sitting too far away from the action on stage. The Bayfront is perfect – comfortable with great sound and lights. BATS takes its inspiration from the work of Theatresports creator Keith Johnstone.

Everything that takes place at BATS is 100% improvised – from the dialogue, to the movement, music, songs, lighting and more. I've been to some improv shows where a lot of what they do isn't really truly improvisational. The actors have done it enough that they know what will get laughs and it's canned stuff. Not with BATS – they're the real thing, pure and unadulterated. It's experimental improv with an emphasis on stories. It blows away some of the so-called improv that I've seen at other places. These people are professional actors who get paid and have been doing improv for many years. They explore both short and long-form improv, which isn't easy.

Anyone can do a funny 2-minute sketch, but to perform a 40-minute play with fully developed characters and a structured storyline with a plot is difficult, especially when the actors are creating everything on the fly. The typical show at BATS is broken up into two parts. The first half of the show consists of short bits based on audience suggestions. The second half is a full-length improvisational drama with only the title having been suggested by the audience.

The performers we saw the other night were wonderful and had varied styles. There was Rafe Chase – a multi-dimensional performer with a dry, quick wit. Dave Dennison – an actor with great facial expressions who reminded me a lot of local comedian Larry “Bubbles” Brown. Zoe Galvez – a cute, fun actress who played a wide range of characters. John Kovacevich – the emcee and leader, who reminded me a lot of Steve Carell from “The Office.” And Gerri Lawlor – probably the best actor in the bunch; very physical with fully formed characters. Lawlor was by far the standout of the evening. She possesses a certain flair and energy that I can’t do justice describing here. She reminded me of a cross between Carol Burnett and Phyllis Diller.

Another bright spot is Music Director Joshua Raoul Brody, who plays keyboards along with the show, complete with great sound effects and timely tunes. I was amazed at how he could play songs on the spot that were directly related to the action on stage. A good improv show needs a guy like Brody to keep it moving along and Joshua was magnificent.

BATS is at B350 Fort Mason Center in San Francisco. There’s plenty of paid parking, but if you don’t mind walking a little, you can usually park free along the Marina. Their phone number is: (415) 474-6776.