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"I'm at a point in my life where I can't decide if I want to start yoga or smoking."

-Mark Turcotte



JUST FOR LAUGHS

Talented locals and eager audiences have transformed **Portland's comedy scene** into a headline act.

BY MADISON ANDREWS

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO BE in the alternative scene in the Portland area and not hook up with dudes who are into woodworking," deadpans Micaela Tepler with a shrug. No, we're not sharing a private drink in a quiet bar. Tepler is on stage in front of a crowd of laughing strangers. At a time when a little comic relief is welcome, Portland's comedy scene packs a punch from Monday through Sunday.

Step inside **Blue** and you'll find its interior warm and intimate, with deep red walls and muted lighting. On Monday nights, Blue treats its patrons to a stand-up comedy show, "**Worst Day of the Week.**" Presented by **Portland Comedy Co-op**, the event features both local and out-of-state comedians, in-

cluding sets from members Tepler, Connor McGrath, Ali Simpson, and Anders Nielsen.

Shortly before 8 p.m. on a recent Monday, I slip into a seat at the bar. Blue's events are donation-based, and the menu politely requests guests order at least one item. They don't need to tell me twice. A draft of Goodfire Brewing Co. Waves (\$7) can only help subsidize the drag of another Monday.

Showtime. The first comedian is slow to ignite the audience with a quiet yet impassioned monologue about tuna fish, but this crowd isn't baring its teeth—yet. Nielsen describes the crowd at Blue as "our refined, NPR audience." Another round of drinks and several sets later, seasoned comedian Tepler takes the stage, reducing the now-

loosened audience to hysterics with her sharp wit. Her secret? "I use what's around me," she says. "A lot of my material comes out of Portland, but I also like to subvert what people think being a woman is about."

GIN AND JOKES

To give you a head-start on the weekend, Portland Comedy Co-op also produces **Laugh Shack Comedy** every Thursday at **Lincoln's**.

"The best thing about Blue and Lincoln's is they're really well-established," Tepler says. "The people in the audience know what they're getting, and they're coming back." Lincoln's reputation as a hotbed for up-and-coming comedy has been building



“Living in Portland, you have one of two experiences. You’re either eating lobster rolls and getting your driveway shoveled, or you’re making lobster rolls and shoveling someone’s driveway.” -Connor McGrath

steadily. “We’ve been near or at capacity for every show in the last two months, which isn’t bad for a secret bar,” says Nielsen. “We’ve hosted many comics who’ve done shows like *Conan*, *Kimmel*, and *Comedy Central Presents*.”

While performers need comedic chops to kill a set on stage, Tepler claims comedy is not a solo act. “The audience can make a show.” And armed with the five-dollar drinks menu, the crowd at Lincoln’s is “always great.”

At 8 p.m. on a recent Thursday, Lincoln’s is teeming with guests. By the time the show starts, it’s standing room only. Tepler is the host, introducing us to a varied mix of comedians. First up, a young Boston-based woman who finishes her uproarious set with a ukulele song about politics and Tinder dates. Next is a soft-spoken man who quips about Maine weather, followed by the tuna fish joker from Monday night with a revised set, which now delights this audience.

“Portland is a very liberal place in the US, which is, so far, the worst country in the world on every level.”

-Anders Nielsen

INTO THE BULLPEN

On Wednesdays at 8 p.m., head upstairs at **Bull Feeney’s** for **Portland Comedy Showcase** to get your farcical fix midweek. The fast-and-loose stand-up show, founded in 2013 and run by comedian Mike Levinsky, “is the longest running comedy series in Portland,” says Mark Turcotte, who often performs there. “There are few opportunities elsewhere in the state, especially for newer comics who need to get on stage and work out material. The thing I appreciate most about the Portland scene is the passion. You can see it in the quality and production of the shows,” he says. “Stand-up is the only art form that needs to be developed in front of an audience. With opportunities to perform or take in a show just about every night of the week, I think it’s working.”



Lewiston’s Dawn Hartill hosts an all-male lineup on a recent Wednesday night. One regular, Jamie Roux, regales guests with details of his last date, quipping that the next time we see him, he’ll “probably be single.” Despite the small crowd, the room soon fills with energy.

LAUGHING MATTERS

What better way to wind down your weekend than in the company of some of Portland’s most comical residents? The doors open at 8 p.m. for **Sunday Night Stand Up!**



at **Empire**. Though more frequently recognized as a music venue, Empire’s comedy events draw increasingly large crowds.

“Originally we started comedy at Empire as an open-mic night in 2015,” says Lucas Salisbury, Empire’s general manager. “Last year, we switched to showcases and named it Sunday Night Stand Up!” Empire also hosts First Friday Comedy, a nod to Portland’s First Friday Art Walk.

I’m halfway through my drink when host Ian Stuart jumps onto the stage. A self-described “giant white dude with a booming voice,” Stuart’s stage presence is at once commanding and lighthearted. Stuart, who credits Portland’s now-defunct **Comedy Connection** club with starting his career in comedy, has organized and hosted Sunday Night Stand Up! since its inception in 2016. Of the closing of

Comedy Connection in 2012, Stuart says, "I think it spurred an entrepreneurial spirit. There's no barometer of 'success,' as far as becoming the headliner at the local comedy club. It can be tough for some comedians, but it's also a place for people to thrive. A DIY landscape." Mark Turcotte agrees: "The onus is on the comedians to keep the scene alive."

With a red velvet curtain as backdrop, Stuart hones in on the audience by asking about the best part of living in Maine. Like Micaela Tepler, Stuart concedes that location informs some of his material. "For a while I would've considered it hack," he says. "But Mainers are proud of where they're from. If you don't touch on that,

"It's impossible to be in the alternative scene in the Portland area and not hook up with dudes who are into woodworking."

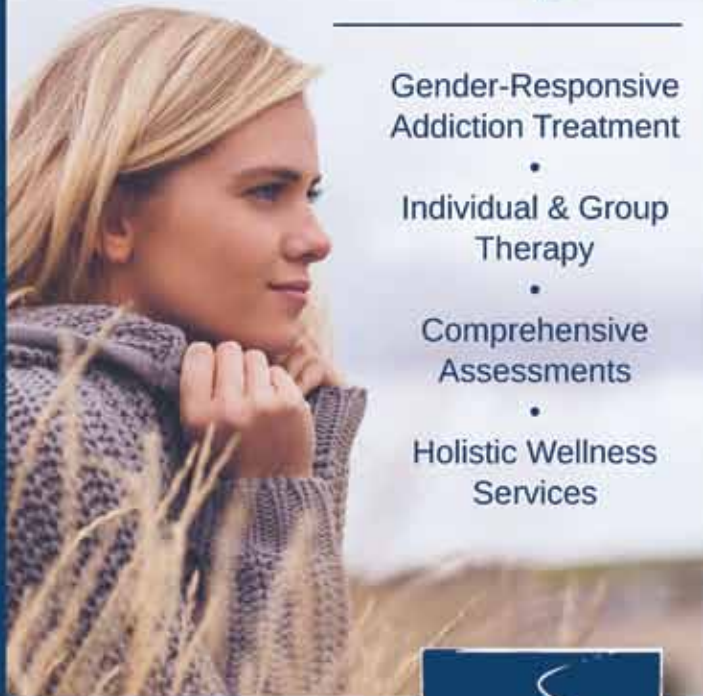
-Micaela Tepler

you're sort of losing a bit of connection." His answer to the best part of living in Maine? The return policy at L.L.Bean.

Sunday Night Stand Up! feels decidedly uncensored. The evening's first comedian, Dennis Fogg, approaches the microphone and announces he's only got a few minutes—his wife and kids think he's at Shaw's. "I'm grateful that you're all here, but I'm even more grateful that they're not." From scathing self-deprecation to lighthearted mockery, this evening's lineup at Empire delivers, charming the audience. In one set, a married mother-of-two titillates the crowd as she describes her "celebrity cheat list," and a jersey-clad 30-something bemoans his family's fervent interest in his relationship status.

A typical lineup at Empire may include "national acts and people who started doing comedy a week ago," Stuart says. "One of the beautiful things about comedy is so many different types of people are attracted to it. That's the fun of it. The Portland comedy scene has never been stronger." ■

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