

And now for something completely different:

HEEBONICS

Improv comic celebrates the underdog

By **RITA POLIAKOV**
Staff Reporter

Isaac Kessler is an underdog. And he's OK with that.

Kessler, 26, was rejected from 16 sports teams in high school, put on academic warning at York University and wasn't accepted to York's theatre program.

But he never gave up.

"I'm pretty driven. People say 'No.' I say 'I'm gonna keep trying,'" Kessler said.

That's how he ended up in Second City's conservatory program, an intense improv training ground.

It's also how he started performing at Impatient Theatre Company and Bad Dog Theatre, two Toronto improv companies, and how he created a two-man show that he'll be taking to the world's largest arts festival this summer in Edinburgh.

Kessler wasn't supposed to be an improv comedian. In fact, he wasn't supposed to be any kind of comedian at all. Originally, he went to York to study information technology, but he was put on academic warning during his first year.

"I'm not a school person," he said, adding that he tried switching into York's theatre program several years later, but was rejected.

In his second year at York, he started taking fine arts courses such as music, where he learned West African drumming.



Isaac Kessler

at Second City.

"I went to my first class, and I fell in love. It was three hours of heaven," he said. "Those three hours, that's how life should be lived. There's total support, no judgment. There's no negativity."

One of the first things he learned about improv was to never say no.

"The idea is to say yes to everyone... All mistakes are gifts, because you can do no wrong in improv. Everything you do is right," he said. "On stage, you make a move, I make a move. It's so freeing. It's what we try to be in life."

After finishing all the course levels at Second City, he decided to audition for its conservatory program.

"Anyone can take the A to E [levels at Second City], but the conservatory program is special," he said. "You're with the same people for a year and a half. They're training you to create a Second City show."

Around the same time, Kessler also started taking improv classes at Impatient Theatre and Bad Dog Theatre.

"The Impatient Theatre Company blew me away. That was a huge moment for me. [I thought] I don't know what this is yet, but this is what I need."

He soon realized that his love of improv was based partly on the connections he's made with his fellow performers.

"My teammates I perform with, you create friendships and connections. I have 10-year friendships and I have friends from improv who I've known for two years. I'm closer to them," he said. "You have to have total trust with [other performers]."

Kessler continued taking classes and eventually started teaching and performing at Impatient Theatre and performing at Bad Dog Theatre and Vanguard Comedy Theatre.

"[Improv] is extremely terrifying. That's why I love it. It's the ultimate risk-taking... You have to follow the fear," he said. "You've got to be vulnerable in comedy... being able to be vulnerable on stage is what connects us to being human."

According to Kessler, the art of improv is unique, because of the constant state of change that defines each performance.

"[People] say improv is recyclable. It's not recyclable. Improv is like coal. You crush it and it becomes a diamond," he said, smiling proudly at his analogy. "I like that."

In 2008, Kessler's love of improv took him to the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, where he performed with the sketch troupe Toronto on Top.

"It was incredible. It was one of those big moments. I had to write a sketch show in three months," he said. "It was a big money-loser, but what an incredible confidence-builder."

After travelling to Australia, Kessler was talked



Improv comedian Isaac Kessler, right, performs with fellow comedian Ken Hall in *2 Man No Show*.

into applying to perform at the Toronto Fringe Festival in 2009. In January of that year, he was chosen to participate.

"It was this moment of fear and excitement. Now it's like, 'You have to do something,'" he said.

Kessler enlisted the help of Ken Hall, a fellow improv comedian who he met at Second City.

"[Hall's] 4-foot-9, Scottish and one of the best in the city," Kessler said. "He's one of my best friends.

We have a lot in common. We're the underdogs."

This realization was the basis for the show they ended up writing together called *2 Man No Show*, which is a mixture of sketch comedy and improv.

In the show, Hall falls in love with a chair, Kessler re-enacts the film *Jurassic Park* in five minutes, and the two performers do an African drum version of Beyoncé's *All the Single Ladies*.

"We sold out the last five shows. It was this crazy buzz non-stop last summer," Kessler said, adding that the show was chosen as a Fringe favourite by audiences.

Kessler and Hall took the show to the FRIGID New York Festival and the San Francisco SketchFest, and they'll be performing it at the New York City SketchFest in June and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the biggest arts festival in the world, this summer.

"It's a pretty crazy show... I wear spandex," Kessler said of *2 Man No Show*. "It feels great to have something you're proud of."

Kessler and Hall will be performing *2 Man No Show* at Second City in Toronto on May 16. For tickets, call the Second City box office at 416-343-0011, or go to www.secondcity.com. For more information about Kessler and the show, visit www.2mannoshow.com.



Isaac Kessler, right, performs with Ken Hall in their sketch comedy *2 Man No Show*. [Kate Millet photo]

"It was the first time my creative side came out," he said.

Eventually, Kessler took a drama course, where he got his first taste of improv.

"That was the best," he said. "At the surface level, [improv] is just being able to make people laugh. That's something that's really important for me – bringing joy to other people."

It didn't take long for Kessler to become addicted. In 2006, he moved downtown and started taking classes