

And now for something completely different:

HEEBONICS

Comedian explores new worlds through improv

By RITA POLIAKOV
Staff Reporter

Lauren Stein has created a new world. Its inhabitants can travel through time, fly planes, shop for ground bull meat and drift through upside-down universes.

All without leaving the stage.

Stein, 25, teaches and performs improv in Toronto. Through her private improv classes, she has created a special dimension deep within the city, where each student must choose a new name and a new identity.

"You become your best self. It gives us that freedom to play," she said.

Stein's best self is named Thelle. She was born last March, when Stein started teaching improv in Toronto. But in reality, Thelle has been a part of Stein since she was five years old.

"I've been acting my whole life. At five, I did a shul play," she said. "That was a ton of fun. I've been doing drama non-stop."

Stein studied acting at Trinity Guildhall in London, England, and later worked as an assistant teacher in the program. Although the school didn't focus on comedy, it did give Stein a taste of improv.

"I've always been random. I was always in improv, I didn't know that there was an art form that was just improv," she said.

Stein, a graduate of the University of Guelph's drama program, first taught improv while in Hawaii in the summer of 2008. That October, she started taking courses at Impatient Theatre Co., a Toronto improv theatre company.

Last August, she was put on an incubator improv team, which is the first of three team levels.

After the first level, performers can advance to the Herald, which is a three-scene improvisation performance, and then on to the house team, the highest level at Impatient Theatre.

"When I looked into this, I realized, yes, this is my passion. This is what I was meant to be," she said. "When I go back to a play, they're [rehearsing] the same scene. I'm like, 'How do you do that?'" she said.

For Stein, improv is about exploration.

"You start out with an initiation. You're exploring this world. You just go further, and you reach the limits of this world," she said. "There are no mistakes. Everything that happens is meant to happen. Everything is right."

Improv is about taking simple concepts and creating intricate dimensions, Stein said. A character who doesn't know his name could

turn into a 30-minute scene.

"We take [it] to a ridiculous height. And funny things will happen," she said. "What's your name?' 'Um, I don't know.' That can be explored until the world ends."

Apart from her private classes, Stein also held improv workshops for the B'nai Brith Youth Organization (BBYO) and worked with children at the Jewish Family and Child's Jerome D. Diamond Adolescent Centre.

"I'm so involved in the Jewish community, that's where I meet a lot of [students]," she said, adding that improv is a good way of exploring Jewish themes and studying the Torah.

While performing improv, Stein enjoys the unique connection she can create with the audience.

"You're breaking the fourth wall. The audience is a part of the show," she said. "It's a different vibe. The audience informs what you do."

But not everything works on stage.

"Everybody has bad sets. I try not to panic, or try and redeem it," she said. "Improv doesn't always have to be funny. But sometimes you feel [it's a bad set] and that's the worst thing."

This is a risk Toronto audiences have to take, Stein said.

"People don't want to spend a night not knowing if it's going to be the best thing ever. But it is," she



Lauren Stein

said. "This is Toronto's art form, more than ballet, more than opera."

While Toronto is filled with improv comedians, few get paid for performing. As a comedian and a teacher, Stein has made it her mission to spread the art form through her city.



Stein, second from right, and other fellow improvisers performed at the St. Joseph's Street Festival last summer. From left are Caitlin Chu, Daniel Tseng, Derek Ensoll, Stein, and Micah Vernon.

"The thing I'm finding hardest is that most people haven't heard of improv. They're like, 'Yoga we know. Come to us with yoga.' Within 10 years, everybody will do improv... I'm willing to take that on as my mission," she said.

"I like local art a lot, it's the greatest thing to be able to create that art."

Stein spent the last few summers doing just that. In the summers of 2007 and 2008, she organized a theatre festival and then a film festival, both called Random Thoughts Come Alive, that showed off local work.

Stein also co-wrote, co-produced and co-directed a web show called Starving Artist, which follows a group of poor artists who live together. When one becomes famous, he decides to hide his success from his friends.

"It was so much fun to make something and have it posted," she said, adding that only several episodes made it up. "We rented equipment, but we couldn't get someone to edit it for free."

Stein may still be climbing the comedic ladder in Toronto, but she knows where she wants to be.

"I would really love to spend my life performing and teaching," she said.

To watch Starving Artist, visit www.StarvingArtistTheShow.com. To find out more about her classes, contact Stein at LNAProductions@gmail.com.