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The Stage Uncaged

How a performative open mic From Iowa became a theatrical springboard in Austin

BY WAYNE ALAN BRENNER, FRI., APRIL 15, 2005

Shannon McCormick, head shaved bald and providing his faintly cartoonish good looks with a sort of Eminem-by-way-of-

Lex-Luthor effect, is excited. He punctuates his speech and the language of his tall improviser's body with jabs and swoops of his long pale hands, his olive eyes agleam. He's talking about theatre, about comedy improvisation, about living in Austin because there's no place else he and his wife, Lacey, would rather live, and he's excited.

"No Shame Theatre is going great again," he says, grinning like a spokesmodel for the invigorating powers of caffeine. "Things were a little sketchy for a while, but now – and this is its fifth year in Austin – we've found a way to make it more viable."

No Shame Theatre, the Hideout-based performance showcase often hosted by the effervescent McCormick, provides a stage where performers can offer acts that might be too experimental for other showcases; where up-and-comers can develop works in progress for full production later; where theatre newbies can dip their toes into a public performance pool instead of diving in all the way and possibly drowning in the unfamiliar depths. There's nothing else like it in town. And it was having, er, problems?

"We'd been staging it twice a month," says McCormick, "which didn't really allow any momentum to build up. Now we do it weekly on Fridays for two months, then take a month off to recharge, then do another two months of Fridays, and so on. And the response has been terrific."

And is this No Shame something that, classically, sprang full-blown from the cue-ball noggin of its local impresario?

"I discovered No Shame Theatre at the University of Iowa," he demurs. "It'd been started there in 1986, by three guys: Todd Ristau, Stan Ruth, and Jeff Goode. I was there from 1990 to 1994, as an English major. And I was at the summertime orientation, and all the chapters of all these groups had their booths set up. You had, like, the campus Mormons, the college Democrats and conservatives, all this stuff. And No Shame Theatre had a booth. There was this freaky guy with blue hair – Doug Dawson, who was then hosting the thing – and they had little zinelike, pamphlet scripts of some of the pieces that'd been done. And of all the stuff that I saw, I was like, 'Wow, *that* looks kind of cool: a weird theatre thing.' And I went to see it during my first couple of weeks at school and was hooked."

"Hooked," he says, crooking his right index finger, jerking it like Hemingway gaffing a tarpon. "But it took me almost a year before I got onstage. Then I started performing. And kept performing. And never stopped."



Shannon McCormick
PHOTO BY KENNETH GALL

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And what's he – and No Shame – doing in Austin?

"After college," he says, "there wasn't really a logical place to move to. I'm from rural Iowa, and there's not a whole lot shaking there. A lot of Lacey's and my friends live in New York, but it didn't make sense, financially, to think about moving there. So we looked around. And I'd read an article in *American Theatre* that highlighted Jason Neulander, and *Salvage Vanguard* kind of stuck in my mind. And when we came and visited, to check Austin out, I was like, 'I really want to live in a place where there's good theatre.' And I saw that *Salvage Vanguard* had a play going on, and Lacey and I went to see it, and it was Dan Dietz in *Terminal Hip*."

"Which is all it takes," I suggest.

"Which is all it takes," agrees McCormick. "And when we were there, we ran into Colin Swanson (playwright and director of Austin Script Works), who we knew from Prague, where she and I had done theatre together. I hadn't even known she was in Austin. And when we moved here, we got her house. She wanted to get out of it, and we moved in.

"And I don't regret it," says the gleamingly bald man, sitting at his dining room table. "I love this place more every day. It's cosmopolitan enough *and* it's small enough. It's easy to meet people, because they're so willing to engage with you, whatever your thing might be. Other cities aren't like that; they're not as easy to build friendships in."

"I think people live here because they want to have fun," says Lacey, slicing at a pizza in the kitchen.

"It's a town that understands the importance of having a good time," says McCormick. "And the management at the Hideout – Sean Hill, pretty much – if it weren't for their generosity and help, No Shame wouldn't be able to go on."

But who exactly is it that goes on in this performance free-for-all?

"The ideal No Shame performer," says McCormick, "is somebody who's interested in theatre but doesn't know how to go about getting involved in it. Or somebody who's already doing theatre but wants to try out new material of their own. And it's easy, because we don't have a lot of rules. The piece has to be five minutes or less, it's got to be original, and that's it. People sign up at 10:30, and we put them into the schedule, and away we go. There's no advanced vetting of the pieces – some of them are improvisational, no script at all, so it's whatever the participants want to make of it.

"Oh, but don't hurt the space or anybody in it. That's the only other rule. So no, like, *napalming* of the stage or audience in some sort of incendiary performance-art piece."

No napalming of the stage, he says. What a joker this guy is. Right? I mean, just how weird does it get up there?

"There are two kinds of weird that happen at No Shame," explains McCormick. "There are the weird pieces in which the artists are totally in control of what they're doing and have made an interesting piece of experimental theatre. Like this *Butoh* piece by Caroline Sutton, about dating and relationships, where she came out covered in *Butoh* white with a plastic wedding-dress-looking thing, and she walked – *very* slowly – over about 16 dozen cases of eggs. It was amazingly beautiful. And this other guy, Michael Garcia, brought in a piece called "Snacks." It was about Mexican-American identity, and he put on a skull mask – a Day of the Dead kind of mask – and a straw hat. And Herb Alpert's *Tijuana Brass* was playing in the background, and he laid out a kind of Robert Smithson *Spiral Jetty* of dried pinto beans and walked across them. We had, like, this weird confluence of people-walking-on-food clinical-therapy/dance pieces.

"But then there are the pieces where you don't know how in control the artists are of their own material, and are they *kidding*, or are they having a *mental breakdown onstage*, or is it some combination of both that kind of oscillates back and forth the whole time? I love those pieces.

"We've got a few regulars," continues McCormick. "There's *Smarty Pants*, who's a balloon-twister clown. Brian Roberts and his friend David Toscano bring in a lot of sketch comedy. I do a series called 'The Adventures of Ghost Hat, the Hat Ghost.' A woman named Patton Quinn does monologues and stand-uppy kind of stuff. And there's a sketch troupe called the *Plurals* – I think they're from San Marcos – and they've been a really funny, bright addition lately."

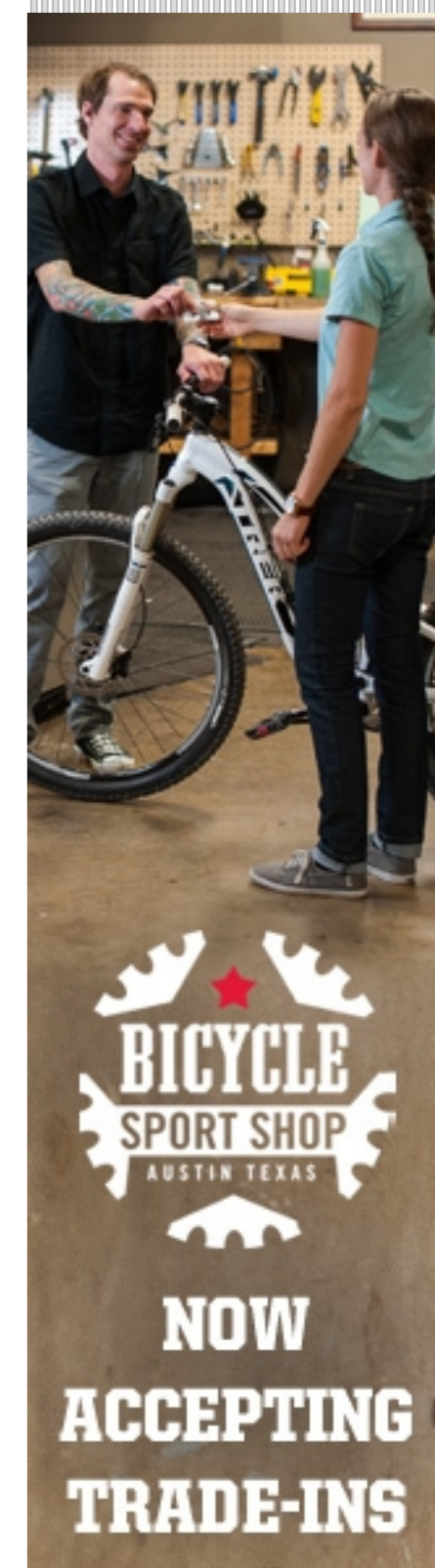
And with enough bright, funny additions and regulars enlivening the stage (or attempting to) each week, what might the future hold for No Shame Theatre?

"I'd like to see us become what *Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind* is in Chicago: a reliable source of really cool, experimental theatre that's wildly popular and sells out all the time," says



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