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An improvised civics lesson

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The Theater of Public Policy sparks discussions at HUGE Improv Theater

LYNDALE — From the moment Julie Blaha leaps out of her second-row seat and sprints onto the stage of HUGE Improv Theater, one thing is apparent: Blaha is very comfortable in front of a crowd.

Maybe this shouldn't be surprising. As a middle school math teacher, Blaha performs every workday in front of one of the toughest audiences around. Maybe, though, she's just gotten used to the spotlight.

Blaha is president of the teachers' union for the state's largest district, Anoka-Hennepin, a district that faced national scrutiny as its school board debated how teachers should address homosexuality in the classroom. That's the topic for this night's edition of The Theater of Public Policy, and that's why Blaha is taking a seat on stage amid applause and a swell of synthesizer chords and — after huge amounts of media attention in the past year, capped by a bit part in a feature story appearing in the February issue of Rolling Stone — maybe that's not such a big deal for her anymore.

Blaha, an energetic redhead, is beaming when Tane Danger introduces her to the audience, about 30 people sipping wine and beer in the dark beyond the stage lights. It feels like a very intimate version of a television talk show, with Danger playing the genial host in a striped tie and tweed jacket — a professorial look that belies his youth.

The topic this night is nothing if not serious. The Anoka-Hennepin debate began after a string of teen suicides, including the deaths of four students who were bullied either because they were gay or classmates assumed they were.

On this night, it's been just three days since the Feb. 13 Anoka-Hennepin school board vote to toss out its so-called neutrality policy and adopt one that requires staff to “affirm the dignity and self-worth of all students,” and as Blaha discusses the difficulties of teaching under the old regime a group of five improvisers seated behind her listen intently. They have the toughest job tonight: turning all of this into humor on the fly.

Young and engaged

Too complicated, too controversial, too boring — a public policy conversation can be all of those things, any one of which can spell death for the kind of long-form, improvised comedy practiced at HUGE. Danger, talking the morning before Blaha's appearance, admitted, “I really could not have told you prior to it being on stage that it was going to work.”

It has, though, succeeded enough for a second season at HUGE after an initial run last fall. Danger, co-creator Brandon Boat and their rotating cast of improvisers have shared the stage with former Bush Foundation President and onetime gubernatorial candidate Peter Hutchinson, radio economist Chris Farrell and Star Tribune columnist Lori Sturdevant, among others, and this season will touch on topics ranging from anti-gay bullying to energy policy to the Vikings stadium debate.

Danger and Boat, both in their mid-20s, met as students at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, where they started their first improv group as students. They're younger than most of The Theater of Public Policy

cast, and they haven't had the same level of formal training as others, most of who studied with groups like the Brave New Workshop or Stevie Ray's Improv Company.

What Danger and Boat do have, though, is a keen interest in civic engagement coupled with a strong belief that learning and laughter are compatible.

On stage

Back at HUGE, Boat and four other improvisers have taken over the stage. They're getting big laughs playing members of the Parents Action League, an activist group accused of anti-gay bias, as goofy superheroes.

In another scene, set in a teacher "re-orientation" meeting, an improviser takes the idea of a neutrality policy to an absurd extreme, saying: "I'm neutral about everything. Ask me anything. I don't have an opinion."

The line gets the biggest laugh of the night.

Relationships

That morning, Danger was asked how they make humor out of difficult topics, like bullying in schools. He said the humor was "in the relationships" — in the power dynamics that pit one group against another (like parent groups and school boards, or students and administrators) and in the misunderstandings and miscommunication that stymie progress.

"There are silly things that are the reasons we can't figure these things out," he said.

For Danger, the most exciting part of the night isn't his Q-and-A with the guest, or the improvisation that follows. It's when the audience gets to ask questions, and it's also at the beginning and end of each show, when an audience survey measures their attitudes on that night's topic.

Some nights, those attitudes go through a significant shift in just 90 minutes.

"We are really not in the business of providing particular policy solutions for people," Danger explained. "... Our job is to ask questions and parse things out."

"Comedic therapy"

The lights are up and Blaha is mingling in the audience, looking just as giddy as when she took the stage.

"It's almost like therapy — comedic therapy," she says. "... What a good way to put the last couple of months behind us."

Then the truth comes out. She seemed like such a natural on stage because she took four years of improv classes at the Brave New Workshop. When HUGE opened, she became a founding donor.

"Look," she says. "I have my name on a chair."

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Go see it

The Theater of Public Policy runs 7 p.m. Thursdays through March 29 at HUGE Improv Theater, 3037

Lyndale Ave. S. Tickets are \$5 at the door. T2P2.net. 412-HUGE (4843).