

Monday, May 4, 2015 - People and Chairs' Sally Smallwood interviews Sasha Wentges and Brian G Smith in her preview of Live from the Annex at <http://peopleandchairs.com/2015/05/04/variety-is-the-spice-of-live-from-the-annex/>.

## Variety Is The Spice of Live From The Annex

*Most live theatre is aimed at stand-up, sketch, improv, or concert audiences. [Live From The Annex](#) combines all of them – with a side of hummours – in a series of shows the first Tuesday of each month. We spoke with Artistic Director Brian G. Smith and Programmer Sasha Wentges about the project.*



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**P&C:** Tell us a little about *Live At The Annex*; how it came about and what the audience can expect.

**BGS:** Well first of all, Sally, it's called Live FROM the Annex, and so now I'm pissed off. Nice start: you made a middle-aged, single father cry. Way to go.

**SW:** *Live From the Annex* grew out of a class that Brian was teaching at Annex Improv. Laurie Murphy (*LFTA* co-producer) and I were both students in the class at the time. We pitched the idea of doing live performances in a cabaret setting to Brian at our local watering hole after class one evening. We planted the seed. He watered it and out grew *Live From The Annex*.

**BGS:** It occurred to me that if we created a third level to the Annex Improv program (Performance Ensemble), and gave it an on-camera element, that would help make the idea of producing a cabaret justifiable business-wise for me. 'Cause I needed another thing to do every month like I need another three-year-old who won't eat anything but pizza and who takes 20 minutes just to get his goddammed shoes on. Seriously, I'm so busy with that shit already it's insane. But another revenue stream for the school seemed like a good idea.

**SW:** So Brian created another level to his classes with the understanding that whoever was in that class would get a chance to perform in the monthly cabaret series. The 12 of us drank a bunch of beers one night after class and came up with 'Brunswick Stew' as the name. They would become the 'host troupe', and we rounded out the evening with a guest musician; a sketch troupe and some audience participation.

**BGS:** I hired Lisa Merchant to teach/direct the Performance level. She's a kick-ass teacher, and that's what they needed to get in shape for a show of this calibre. She focused intensely for six weeks on ensemble character and relationship work, 'cause apparently I suck at relationships, so what did I have to teach them. That's why I'm picking up endless Spiderman shit *by myself* day in, day out.

**P&C:** *Live From The Annex* combines theatre with an online streaming component. How do the two relate to each other?

**BGS:** I have been working at finding a way to bring Toronto improv to another (audience) level ever since the days of Bruce Hunter's Workshop at the Second City Tim Sims Playhouse in the late '90s.

I would go home after watching those shows and think: "How can this amazing, world-class, local comedy talent get out to a bigger audience?" When Livestreaming became a thing, I bought a bunch of HD gear and started to do that around town (e.g. [\*Pat Thornton's 24 Hours of Stand-up for Stephen Lewis\*](#), and [\*Streamfest\*](#)).

**SW:** Brian decided that he really wanted to have not just the studio in-house participation, but also the live-streamed audience participating through twitter feeds etc. We launched a 'pilot' version on April 7th. Audiences can expect a well-crafted show with some top-notch performers and a live 'visual classroom' with Brunswick Stew – and of course, free hummours!

**BGS:** Also, Lisa and I came up with a super-cool idea to make the Brunswick Stew portion of the show a visible classroom, where she would not only side-coach to help them out if they got

in trouble, but also to point out shit that was really working – so that the audience would get an education about improv strategies while they enjoyed the show. Then Lisa fucked off to do a gig in England, and so I have to do it. Relationships, am I right?

**P&C:** How do you choose the acts for each show?

**BGS:** That's Sasha's baby.

**SW:** I tend to go out to see a lot of stuff in the city. I'm restless that way; I choose from whom I like and who is available at the time. Then Brian and I look at our options and put together the best combo for variety and overall excellence.

**P&C:** Brian, you've been involved with the Centre for Social Innovation for some time, filming, teaching improv, and now with *Live From The Annex*. What's different about CSI than most other venues?

**BGS:** CSI Annex is a very cool place with a culture all of its own. NFPs, charities and tech start-ups mixing and connecting with each other. Over the last couple of years, I've outfitted one of CSI's big flexible meeting rooms (The Garage) with a stage, lights, etc. It's become a 75-seat cabaret theatre and we've had a bunch of parties and shows and video shoots down there for all the CSI members and guests. I charge them SO MUCH MONEY! I'm telling you, I'm rolling in it – shooting fish in a fucking barrel.

**SW:** I think the main message at CSI is the art of collaboration. Just as the three of us, Brian, Laurie, and Sasha are collaborating, so is CSI collaborating with us.

**BGS:** That's a better answer. Please don't print my last bit.

**P&C:** As improv continues to grow in popularity, do you find audiences are no longer just improvisers performing for each other?

**SW:** Having other elements in the show (e.g. music, CSI member profiling) exposes all our acts to potential new crowds.

**BGS:** My goal is to get as many people as possible to watch the shows on the www. Laurie has worked hard to pull together all the social media clout of our partners and sponsors (100s of thousands) to drive traffic to our livestream: [Dailymotion.com/YouAndMedia](http://Dailymotion.com/YouAndMedia). I want to disrupt the notion that improv and live club comedy doesn't translate to the screen. I think you just have to serve it up in a way that's palatable. And that starts with really good audio. Then add three-camera live switching. Then really good Toronto comedy, which we have in spades.

Catch [\*Live From The Annex\*](#) starting tomorrow, Tuesday, May 5. Doors open at 7:30 pm. Featuring Colin Sharpe, The Templeton Philharmonic, Dr. Ew, Brunswick Stew and host Brian G. Smith. With talent like this, it's just a matter of time before they get Sabra to sponsor.



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