

Published August 13th, 2014

Synergy Theater Comes to Downtown Lafayette

By Sophie Braccini



Kenn Adams (left), Colleen McCormick and Clayton Dodds in the Big Room Studio Theater at Lamorinda Music. Photo Sophie Braccini

Kenn Adams is an unusual mix of mindful leader and comedian. He is moving his company, Synergy Theater, to downtown Lafayette. With him come 25 years of improvisation experience and a troupe that includes some of the best improvisers in the Bay Area. Their new home is Lamorinda Music, where they will perform the third weekend of every month. Synergy Theater plans to get some big laughs.

"Improvisation is the vibrant spontaneity of the moment," says Adams. "The improviser has to be very rooted in the moment, and open to every nuance coming from his partner." He adds that improvisers should not be thinking ahead and trying to be funny, or carry regret over something that happened in the past. "Then you're not in the now, and that's very dangerous," he adds. Mindful meditation is indeed a part of the more advanced training and rehearsal work in Adams' troupe.

"Improvisation has three rules," he continues. "Be spontaneous; always make your partner look good - what he says is the difference between improvisation and stand-up comedy; and third,

build on your partner's ideas, with no negative humor. Our culture is based on helping other people succeed first and getting laughs by pointing out positive traits."

Adams explains that when improvisers are on stage, they are caught in a paradox. "You are being completely spontaneous, but you also have an artistic goal and are constructing a story," he says. "There is a difference between spontaneity and randomness." He further explains that improvised storytelling is spontaneity in the shape of a story, with a beginning, middle, and end. That's what Adams has devised and published; a process that helps improvisers understand, at an organic level, the dramatic structure so they can do two things at one time - be spontaneous, filtered through the lens of dramatic art.

Adams grew up in New York and says he always knew he would be on stage, or somewhere around it. In high school and college he acted, directed and wrote plays. "Then one day, in college, I discovered improvisation and knew I had found my calling," he remembers.

Soon his desire to tell full stories led him to ask the question, "Why don't we do this for more than a few minutes?" Nobody presented full-length improvisational plays at that time, so he practiced and developed a concept, eventually putting it in writing. His book is called "How to Improvise a Full-Length Play; The Art of Spontaneous Theater."

Adams' life in the Big Apple was all about improvisation, until love took him to California where he now resides.

The first Synergy Theater was in Concord, but Adams and his family live in Lafayette and he wanted a performance venue closer to home. You may have caught a show at the Lafayette Community Center. He met Colleen McCormick, who owns Lamorinda Music, and the two agreed that her downstairs theater would be a great space for the troupe. Lamorinda Music is located at 81 Lafayette Circle - with a cornucopia of wonderful restaurants nearby, "We are perfectly located for this," says McCormick.

Local guy Clayton Dodds, now the troupe's marketing manager, first fell in love with Synergy

Theater as a spectator. "My co-worker Ben (Piper) is a performer here and he asked me to come (to a show)," recalls Dodds. "I walked in with no idea of what I was getting into. It was hilarious! The audience interaction was really cool. I got hooked."

Adams explains that Synergy Theater's shows have many formats. Saturday evenings will feature "a completely improvised two-act play, at the mercy of the public's suggestions," he says, and on Sundays there will be matinee performance called "Spontaneous Combustion," which is built on the life story of a local person or business. A volunteer will come on stage and tell stories about his/her life, and the actors will create comic improv scenes based on the stories. "This will be funny, but we won't poke fun at our guests," he promises, adding that he wants to make the shows a reflection of the local community. "The idea is that everybody's life is rich and valuable if you take the time to explore it."

Synergy Theater makes its debut at Lamorinda Music this week - at 8 p.m. on Saturday, Aug. 16 and 3 p.m. on Sunday, Aug. 17. The September performances are scheduled for Lafayette Art and Wine Festival weekend, Sept. 20-21. Can't wait? Snippets can be found on YouTube and Facebook. For tickets and information about shows and classes, visit www.SynergyTheater.com.

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[back](#)

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