

SEVEN DAYS [11.16.11]

Potato Sack Pants Theater Sketches Out a New Show

State of the Arts

BY PAMELA POLSTON

“We are so seat of the pants, it’s not even funny,” says **Meredith Gordon**. Except that it is. Snort-milk-out-your-nose funny.

“We” is **Potato Sack Pants Theater**, a sketch-comedy troupe that debuted last May at the Burlington Fringe Festival, a three-day event at the **Off Center for the Dramatic Arts**. PSPT’s piece “Character Flaws” was all ridiculous costumes, bad wigs, vaudevillian shtick and unhinged humor. Gordon was responsible for several of those “flawed” characters.



The group put on another show at the Off Center in September — the first in its “A Mini Series: A Series of Mini Comedy Shows.” The second, and last, show is this Saturday, November 19.

Though local standup comics have proliferated in recent years, Potato Sack is the rare ensemble devoted to the sketch format, recalling Burlington’s short-lived Laff Dammit in the late ’80s. Audiences have responded with giggles, guffaws and peeing their pants a little.

So, why such a short “series”? “We don’t know what we’re doing. I mean, we *really* don’t know what we’re doing,” **Andy Gordon**, Meredith’s husband and comic partner, confides faux-gravely during a recent interview. It’s a point he stresses several times.

At first, the six members of Potato Sack thought they’d just do one show a year, explains Meredith Gordon, but then they “had enough material left over” for a couple of fall performances. And for several very silly videos, which can be viewed on YouTube. And then, she says, “We thought we’d spend the winter writing new material.”

In fact, PSPT never expected to be a “troupe” in the first place. “We’re just a bunch of friends who like to make each other laugh,” says Meredith. She and two other member-friends work together at Burlington’s Select Design, which suggests the company’s “fuel for innovative brands” may be hopped up on humor. So far, Andy Gordon’s presence in the creative department at WCAX has not made the news funnier, but one can still hope.

All six friends — three couples, all native Vermonters — show up for an interview at the Off Center, chairs arranged on stage in a circle, as if for group therapy. The potential concept for a future sketch does not go unnoted.

The Gordons, both 29, have known each other since seventh grade. Meredith is average height, with short blond hair and a perpetual smile that suggests she's in on the cosmic joke. As a character-driven performer, she is loud, uninhibited and versatile, like Gilda Radner on early "Saturday Night Live." Andy is tall and lanky, quick witted, prone to funny faces and physical slapstick. Think a young Dick Van Dyke. (Kids, if you don't get these references, visit the internet.)

Andy Gordon's foil is **Stetson Ward**, 32. Somewhat shorter and stockier, he bears a resemblance to Billy Crystal. ("But his lips," declares Gordon, blocking the rest of Ward's face with his hands, "are totally Macaulay Culkin.") Ward shows up late, clad in grass-stained shorts and knee socks — he's been playing football. Ward and Andy Gordon have a natural chemistry that apparently compels them to digress into absurdist banter. It's like a shared tic. "The first time Andy and Stetson met, they were instantly connected," observes Meredith Gordon.

Ward's girlfriend, **Erin St. Cyr**, 30, is quieter, a medical researcher by profession. "I realized if I wanted to hang out with my friends, I would have to contribute," she says of Potato Sack. And she does, as a writer and stage manager.

Chad Hayden, 26, and his partner, **Kelsi Goodall**, 25, were "brought in at the last minute," Hayden says. He handles lighting at PSPT's shows; she does sound, ticket sales and ushering.

St. Cyr, Hayden and Goodall, says Meredith Gordon, also act as the performing members' "filters," nixing the private jokes that don't quite translate to the stage.

What *do* they find funny? "Certain pitches of dog farts," Ward says, temporarily derailing the conversation.

"I like humor that makes people uncomfortable," reports Hayden. Says Goodall: "real-life stuff that isn't supposed to be funny." Meredith Gordon agrees that life stories, "the things people do and say," can be fodder for her — "My mom and grandmother somehow find their way into my characters," she says.

"We all have different senses of humor," Meredith continues, "so someone in the audience will connect with each sketch."

"Sometimes there's one person laughing hysterically and no one else is," adds Goodall.

So will Potato Sack Pants Theater turn into Burlington's Second City? Too early to tell, but it's clear this bunch, perhaps appropriately, doesn't take itself too seriously.

"We don't really consider ourselves a theater group," reiterates Andy Gordon. "We just put something out there and hope people laugh."

If all else fails, there is this: "In the next show," Gordon intones, "Stetson and I will be naked."