

Second City fun alive and well

By ELIZABETH WYATT

The Second City National Touring Company returned to the Markham Theatre last week as the second presentation in the theatre's subscription series—but in all other aspects it rated only firsts.

Not having seen Second City live since I was last at the Old Firehall some years ago, and with SCTV now off the air, I wondered as the house lights dimmed if it had had its day. Would we have seen it all before?

The answer was a resounding no. I can't remember when I've laughed so long (and loud, alas) as I did last Wednesday night.

The material is as fresh and irreverent as it ever was. The seven-member cast (five men, two women) is as bright and talented and quick-witted as we've come to expect members of this famous company to be.

Second City's reputation is based on the art of improvisation—building sketches from a given and, in its case, unlikely set of characters and situations. The actors provide their own dialogue.

Most of the program consists of prepared and polished improvs, developed by the cast in workshops.

And many of these are based on promising material gleaned from former shows in the popular segment where the cast improvises spontaneously on suggestions from the audience.

The humor is off-the-wall, the playing style understated and laid back. But the deadpan delivery and controlled energy of the cast precipitate nothing, but hilarity from first to last.

Right off the top we are treated to a dazzling display of the unpredictability that is a hallmark of Second City's appeal.

Alana Shields is having a Freudian nightmare, in which characters merge and change in a succession of unexpected developments—creating surprise after illogical surprise, adding twist after improbable twist. It is a tour de force of imagination.

And it throws the audience off balance and prepares them for anything. They get it.

Sketches come thick and fast, based on such diverse premises as a voyeur and his victim becoming romantically involved; a father trying to relieve his small daughter of nuclear anxiety ("You're much more likely to walk out of this house and get run over by a car"); Windsor's Customs and Immigration office closed for redecoration; the definitive version of L.M. Mont-

gomery's classic, as done by sci-fi director David Cronenberg: "Anne of Green Gables, We've Buried You Here, Today."

They are interspersed with songs like "Fade Away"—about the effect of free trade on "our cutesy culture".

Or with quickies like the one about a man who overdosed on novocaine at the dentist's: "It's all one Conservative party," he blubbers, "and I'll cry if I want to."

The cast's expertise in mime shines through in some expressive body language, particularly in an inventive take-off of video game-

cum-western barroom brawl, done entirely without dialogue.

And the facile blending of unlikely elements is given on-the-spot demonstration in the impromptu third act, when the audience supplies the material.

AIDS ("That'll be a laugh riot"), the stock market crash and trucks on Main St. produced a riotous meeting of the Markham town council. (The poor, misunderstood truck drivers were only trying to help the victims of the crash off the street.)

One woman's memories of buying penny candy from the crotchety old proprietor of a corner store in Mon-

treal ("I could have kicked him in the patoot") led to a side-splitting melange of fractured French.

Colin Mochrie starred as the child-hating "Mr. Patoot"; the rest of the cast were a variety of small victims.

Mochrie is outstanding. His timing is a joy to behold; his charm and boy-next-door looks are endearing.

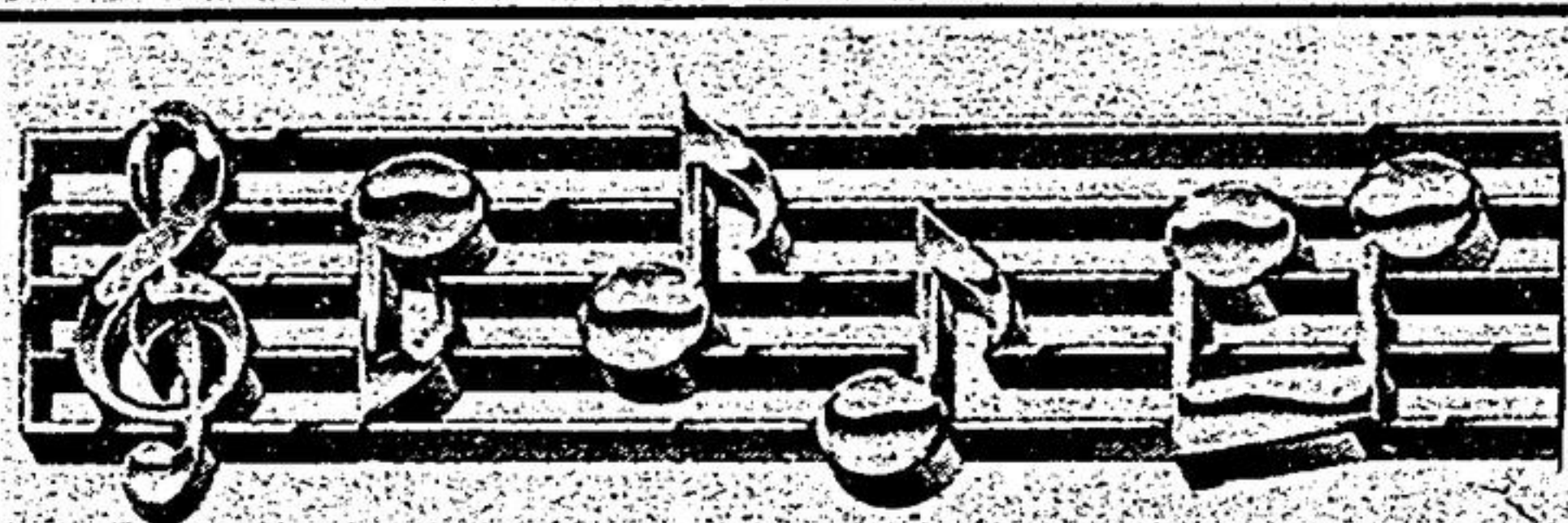
But all are worthy of mention. Ed Sahley is particularly good and he and Crone are masters of the Second City style.

Shields' persona combines reflections of two of the company's most distinguished alumnae—Catherine

O'Hara and Andrea Martin. Jackie Brown is a natural comedienne, though her diction and projection need work. Some of her lines were incomprehensible.

The good-natured Garry Campbell appeared to be as amused as he was amusing and Dennis Cutts, the newest member of the troupe, was memorable as a blank-faced fast food order jockey.

With fresh and funny young talents like these surfacing every year, the future of comedy is secure. Right now it is alive and well and living at Second City.



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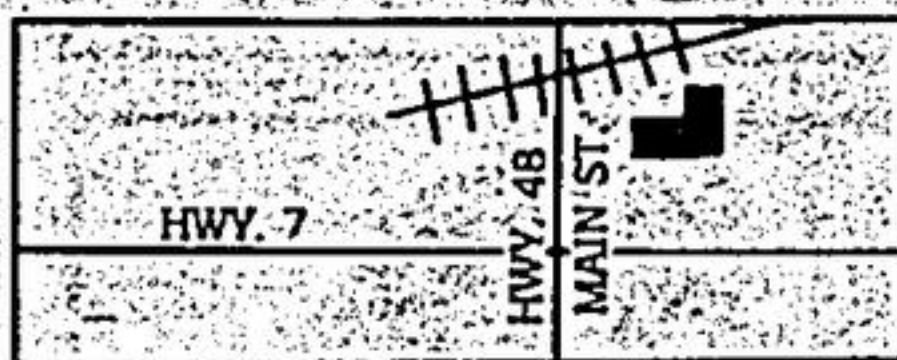
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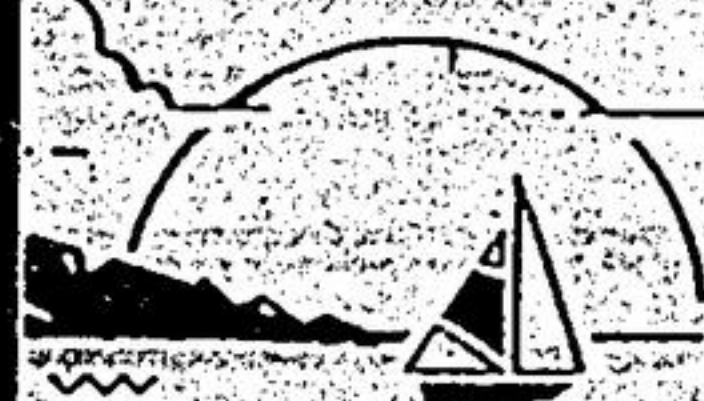
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