

Becoming Dada

The improv comedy troupe Something Dada has been making Clevelanders laugh for 13 years. What does it take to make the jump from their audience to the stage?

by **Tori Woods**

We are singing the “Dada Blues,” the traditional finale of every improv comedy performance by Something Dada. Russ is sitting on a black bar stool on one side of the stage, arms crossed, nodding his head in time to the music. Aaron is clapping along with the beat, moving his lanky limbs around in a free-form groove. The other actors and I are all dancing, swaying, snapping as we sing in front of the royal blue curtain backdrop, in the moody glow of the blue spotlights. We’re tired after an hour and a half of performing, but happy too. It’s been a good show. The song ends and the lights go dark, then bright white, blinding us for a second. Russ introduces us by name, one at a time, as the audience claps for us. I’m one of “us.” I’m a Dada.

The summer I was 17, with a still-new driver’s license and all of Cleveland to explore, I piled some friends into the car and headed downtown. We boldly forged our way from the West Side suburbs to Little Italy for a Mama Santa’s dinner. After an unsuccessful attempt at locating Franklin Castle, we ventured to the Warehouse District to see Something Dada perform. Our group walked down the stairs to the Cabaret Dada basement theater on West Sixth Street. It was crowded with audience members who seemed to already be having a fabulous time — as if the walls of the place had absorbed the continuous stream of humor.

Then the house lights went dark, and the spotlights illuminated the stage. A man with blond hair, a deep, gravelly voice and a mischievous glint in his eyes introduced the troupe. To riotous applause, they jumped onto the stage, all wearing T-shirts in bright, solid colors and jeans. The show started, and the laughs didn’t seem to stop for an hour and a half.

It wasn’t just that they were funny. Many actors can train themselves to be humorous. But nothing in these scenes was planned. The players asked for sug-



gestions from the crowd — a profession? A relationship between two people? What did you receive for your last birthday? — and using only a suggestion, crafted an entirely believable scene with characters, plots, locations.

I did more than sit and laugh. I shouted out suggestions that made the players crack up — “His fingers are turning into goldfish!” “He is simultaneously all of the phases of Michael Jackson’s life!” Watch-

ing the Dadas, I felt this was something I could do, too.

I took my already-developed love of making people laugh and channeled it into improv classes at the Beck Center, and eventually in college. And whenever I could, I saw the Dadas perform. No matter what endeavors I pursued, theatrical or otherwise, it remained a back-of-the-mind daydream for me: imagining myself on that stage, under those lights, with those people.

[My TOWN]

Shortly after I turned 24, I opened my e-mail and saw a notice sent to a mailing list of Dada fans: The troupe was holding open auditions for women. My immediate excitement was tinged with self-doubt. *I haven't practiced in years*, I thought. I'm sure I'm not good enough to join a professional troupe. But another part of me felt that this was the exact opportunity I had been waiting for.

I walked in the door at Dada's new home, the Tower Press Building on Superior Avenue, and I was greeted by faces I had watched throughout the years. Within seconds, faces had names — there's Russ, the blond with the booming voice, a founding member and now general manager. And Aaron, with his mop of black hair framing a baby face with kind eyes and a sly smile. Before rehearsals started, I would actually out-dork myself by sitting in front of my PowerBook, staring at the cast bios on the Dada Web site, memorizing the names that went with the faces: Cody, Mike, Drew, Maria, J.R., Adam, Matt.

The girls who were auditioning filled out forms and chatted with the Dadas. Then Russ hopped onstage, sitting on the edge, dangling his legs as he laid down

the only ground rule of auditions: Have fun. And so the auditioners, the troupe and I all started playing. To my delight, I was holding my own. Before I knew it, I had somehow transformed into a lost corn-fed Kansas girl alone in the big city, on trial for indecent on-street dance moves. Then I became a hiker who sporadically turned into a bat with a need for a tourniquet-wielding EMT. It was so much fun to be working with the same actors I had watched through the years, and so hard to keep from laughing while doing scenes with them.

After a second audition a week later, a co-worker and I were enjoying a quick lunch downtown when my purse started to ring. I tried to quietly pick up the phone to avoid being rude.

"Hey, Tori, it's Aaron from Something Dada. You got the job. We want you to be a Dada."

"Really?" I shrieked as my co-worker laughed and my fellow lunch patrons stared.

Three other girls and I were invited to join in rehearsals starting that week. Starting at that first one, I rapidly became aware of what I remembered, and how much I needed to re-learn or learn from

scratch. There are rules to improv, which allow actors to create the most unbelievably believable scenarios. The rule of "yes and": Always agree with whatever your fellow players give you and enhance the situation, raise the stakes. Never negate: It's boring and dead-ends a scene. Name people. Enter with an emotion. Create a world. Be physical. Don't ask questions. Establish who, what and where. Trust your fellow players.

A few weeks into rehearsing, we were practicing two-man games. For a scene I was in, the suggestion was a copy machine. What began as a routine maintenance call had twisted and turned into a clandestine love affair, followed by an attempted robbery. I was a secretary, but then I was having an affair with the repairman, but wait, he was going to rob me. ... I made the scene unwieldy. I was having trouble letting go, letting the scene evolve naturally from shared experience.

The scene ended and Russ reminded me to respond naturally and without thinking — that humor comes from honesty, not from forced attempts at jokes. He was right, but there was something deeper going on. Maria, the sole female

[My TOWN]

Dada prior to auditions, came over to me and put her arm around my shoulder.

"You know, Tori, you can trust these guys," she said. "You can trust any one of them. They all have your back." She was right. I had to learn to let go.

It can be intimidating on that stage, with no script, no stage directions, no clue what the audience will suggest. You're armed only with your wit, instinct and training. If you overthink the scene, it'll fail. As a writer, second-guessing is part of my nature; onstage, I must learn not to edit myself, to let the ideas flow.

You must also believe that your scene partner will have your back and support you, no matter what. And you must do the same for them. This relationship isn't automatic; it takes time and patience to develop. But as it evolves, scenes come more easily and become funnier.

I knew I was headed in the right direction a few weeks later, when we got together at a bar after rehearsal. Aaron pushed his bangs out of his eyes and asked who wanted to come to his house and play poker that Sunday. Even though my card skills are sketchy at best, I love to play, so I asked if it would be OK if I came too, or if it was just a guys' night.

Aaron dismissed the question with a wave of his hand and his quick grin. "Of course I want you there. You're a Dada now."

After a few months of rehearsing and observing performances, Russ comes up to me as I'm manning the box office. He nonchalantly says, "I'm throwing you up for a few all-plays. Cool?"

Of course it's cool! Joining the full-troupe performances is the first step toward becoming a full-fledged member. As I make change for the audience members filtering through the doors, I have to swallow the desire to tell each of them, "I'm going onstage tonight!"

I'm wearing jeans and the solid shirt — just in case — but I have to grab sneakers from my car. I pause on my way back inside and look through the windows at the audience settling in to their seats. I wonder if I'll be good enough, if I can make them laugh. Maria comes outside, and in her soothing manner, gives me another simple and important piece of advice.

"Just be yourself, be honest" she says, "everything will come naturally."

Aaron comes outside to join us. "You're ready, man. Trust us, we wouldn't have

put you up there if you weren't ready. You're gonna be awesome!"

Feeling better, I run backstage and unnecessarily brush my hair one more time. Russ is just watching me with his cryptic smile, waiting to see what I'll do.

And then it's 10 minutes later, and Russ and Maria and I are embroiled in a scene on a farm involving a dating service for horses. The audience suggestion for profession was "horse inseminator," so we've got an assistant and an inept trainer and a horse owner, not to mention the barn and a cart and a horse. It all just flows — we're not in the Tower Press Building anymore, we're on that farm.

And the crowd is right there with us.

Once we're introduced, we line up and grab hands. We're sweaty from the lights beating down, but it doesn't matter. Russ introduces me, the last actor in the line, and introduces himself as he steps back into line, grabbing my hand. He finishes his closing, saying, "... but all together, we are ..."

And we holler in unison, "Something Dada!" We simultaneously bow, and the lights go off. And we walk off the stage, together. ■