

Theater of the People

Brave New Workshop's holiday show reveals the other side of Christmas.

By Jaime Kleiman



Scenes from *Christmas: The Other White Holiday*

The Brave New Workshop—long before it became the comedic training ground for people such as Al Franken and Louie Anderson—was simply a former circus aerialist's fantasy come true. In the late 1950s, Dudley Riggs, after touring with the Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus (and after suffering a life-threatening fall), quit the biz and formed the Instant Theatre Company in New York City. Riggs's "instant theater" produced a brand-new show every night that was created from audience

input, improvisation, and adrenaline. Adventurous theatergoers ate it up. After a national tour, the company settled in Minneapolis; it's now the third oldest theater company in the Twin Cities and the longest running



satirical theater troupe in the country. The name was changed to the Brave New Workshop in 1961, but the mission remains the same: to write, produce, and perform original sketch comedy.

Surprisingly, BNW shows—despite the sketches that bask in loud-mouthed liberalism and partisan wedgies—attract corporate clients, families, and people who haven't set foot in any other theater in town. Their popularity, artistic director Caleb McEwen says, stems from the community's "sense of ownership over the theater."

"It's a theater of the people," McEwen says. "It's not exclusive or elitist." It's also often fall-out-of-your-seat funny.

Like most theaters in town, BNW's cash cow is its holiday show. They remain topical, but are less political, and have cheeky titles such as *Home for the Hostilities* and *Manger Crashers*; or *Three Wise Guys with a Pack of Camels*. They're so popular that devotees reserve tickets even if they don't know the show's title (which isn't unusual since the show is written and rehearsed only two months before opening night by a team of six improv-savvy actors). "We show you the Christmas that other theaters don't," says McEwen proudly. "People who get sick of the 'Christmas machine' come here and laugh."

This year's show is called *Christmas: The Other White Holiday*. Expect something surprising, irreverent, and what McEwen calls "a buffet of comedy." Yum. **Through Jan. 27.** 2605 Hennepin Ave., Mpls., 612-332-6620, bravenewworkshop.org

Reach Jaime Kleiman at jaimekleiman@earthlink.net.