

2 is a convenient number

Comedy troupe
is good company
and sees no need
to be a crowd

By HENRY MIETKIEWICZ
ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

Take a comedy census and chances are you'll find the average sketch troupe's roster contains four or five players.

And if the act is a duo, it probably leans toward a modified style of standup comedy, like the Smothers Brothers or Rowan and Martin.

Which is why it's so surprising to see Joe's Convenience plugging away at fully plotted sketches with a lineup that consists only of Simon Fraser and Ben Brooks.

Ever since the partners met through a mutual friend just over a year ago, Joe's Convenience has become a monthly highlight of comedy nights at the Rivoli.

And tonight they're hoping to reach a wider audience through the sketch program of The Big Party at the Comedy Slam 94 festival.

The Big Party, featuring dozens of simultaneous and continuous comedy acts on four floors of Whiskey Saigon (250 Richmond St. W.), lasts five hours and kicks off at 8.30 for an all-inclusive price of \$15.

The sketch program on the second floor begins at 9.20 and includes two different sets by Joe's Convenience at 10 p.m. and 12.20 a.m.

Fraser and Brooks could easily have gone their separate ways, rather than attempt sketch comedy with such a limited cast.

But they say they quickly developed such an unexpected compatibility that they decided to brave any obstacle for the pleasure of working together.

"He's such a perfectionist that he bugs me sometimes," Fraser admits, "but what an ideas guy! Whenever I see him, he'll have one or two premises ready to develop.

"It also helps that what we've got is a relationship that feels natural. Neither of us feels forced to work with the other, so there's no pressure."

For his part, Brooks praises Fraser's "strange energy" and the fact that "he's as much of a dreamer as I am."

What makes Joe's Convenience hum is not just the fluid, unexpected twists of its material, but the subtle wit that keeps those twists neatly blended into the body of each sketch.

One of their best pieces — more a product of its eccentric characters than any obvious gags or punchlines — is a three-part sketch in which a pair of addled farmers complain in a laconic drawl. First, they grumble that the weather's too hot, then too cold and, finally, that it's too moderate.

Another fine item involves a pair of roommates who have shared quarters in Montreal and spoken French to each other for well over a year. What neither realizes — and is eventually stunned to discover — is that English is really the first language for both of them.

Adding variety between skits are audio satires of commercials and other bits of radio nonsense. Even the sketches themselves occasionally incorporate other media, such as short films, music or slide projections, for a refreshing shift in perspective.

"What we're striving for,"

Fraser says, "is unexpectedness of presentation, whether in the scripted material or the format. We've seen way too much boring, predictable sketch comedy, and we're hoping Joe's Convenience is a distinct change."

Brooks adds that a display of audio/video versatility may also improve their chances of landing a high-profile spot on TV, the goal of virtually every sketch and standup comedian in Toronto.

Even though Joe's Convenience remains a party of two, its material sometimes does expand to include half a dozen characters — for instance, a sketch about a wholesale staff resignation at a McDonald's outlet.

These roles are filled by local extras — or "guests," as Fraser and Brooks refer to them — and they exist at all because the partners would rather make a temporary change in group dynamics than let a good idea pass them by.

In fact, Fraser and Brooks say they'd be happy to add another permanent member to their ranks if they could find the right person.

"Sometimes it gets awfully tiring for both of us to do all the writing," Brooks says, "so we'd welcome someone new. But we'd absolutely have to have someone who's as good a writer as an actor — a strong-willed person who'd fit the tone of Joe's Convenience.

"The point is, we won't let anything promising pass us by. I can't think of a single time we've ever told one another, 'No, we can't try that idea because it's too big for just two of us to handle.' We may end up dog-tired after a show, but at least we've given it a shot."