

Duo's off-the-wall comedy nets deal with top U.S. producer

Joe's Convenience

When: Tonight, 8:30 p.m.; Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. and 10:30 p.m.

Where: Yuk-Yuk's Comedy Club, in basement of Capital Hill Hotel, 88 Albert St.

Tickets: \$10 tonight; \$13 Friday and Saturday. Call 236-5233 to reserve.

By Steven Mazey

Citizen entertainment writer

After struggling for more than five years to make it on the Toronto comedy scene, Ottawa comic Simon Fraser and Nova Scotia-born comic Ben Brooks got together three years ago to form Joe's Convenience, and they haven't looked back.

Specializing in off-the-wall comedy sketches rather than stand-up, the team has been a big hit in Toronto clubs, they performed eight sold-out shows at Montreal's Just For Laughs Festival last year, and they've taped an episode of CBC television's *Comics!* series to be aired in February.

Even more promisingly, the team signed a development deal in May with Lorne Michaels' Broadway Video, the company that helped make *The Kids in the Hall* a smash hit. Michaels, who's also the producer of *Saturday Night Live*, flew the two comics to Los Angeles last month to showcase their material for television executives.

Tonight through Saturday, comedy fans can catch Joe's Convenience at Yuk-Yuk's Comedy cabaret on Albert Street. It's the first Ottawa performance for the duo. Fraser, who left for Toronto at 18, says he'll be glad to be back.

"It will be nice to say I've had a professional gig in my hometown," says Fraser, 26, who got his start at an early age.

"I always loved performing. I even liked reading out loud in kindergarten. I used to do variety shows in high school. I always preferred sketch comedy and things like Monty Python and *The Kids in the Hall* to stand-up. It just wasn't something I enjoyed as much."



Ben Brooks and Simon Fraser play Ottawa tonight at Yuk-Yuk's

In Toronto, Fraser taught himself the comedy ropes and worked with several short-lived troupes before meeting Brooks.

He says their sketches have an off-kilter quality and, like the *Kids in the Hall*, try to go beyond the obvious punchlines.

"We're not going to do what some groups do and resort to stupid gimmicks like sticking baloney on our foreheads," Brooks told one Toronto interviewer.

It's a formula that's been winning the group rave reviews.

"They are currently not just the best troupe in Toronto, Joe's Convenience is the best thing going in Canada . . . Both (performers) have exceptional timing and strong character ability," wrote *Toronto Star* comedy critic Andrew Clark, who said the two comics show "a tremendous flair for bringing wild, surreal characters to life."