

Successful marriage of Convenience

Egomaniacal T.O. duo
Joe's Convenience
eats, sleeps & breathes
comedy. That's why
they're the best

SIMON FRASER HAS always had trouble with commitment. The 26-year-old sketch comedian has been in the business since he was 16 and during this time, as the only permanent member of the now-extinct troupe Delaware Water Gap, he has gone through a steady stream of partners.

Fraser's wham-bam-thank-you-ladies-and-gentleman style is legendary in this city's comedy circles. So much so that Fraser was able to produce a self-referential one-man fringe theatre show entitled "What the Hell is Delaware Water Gap?" Fraser is probably the only comedian in the city who, when he is not present, is the butt of cruel caricatures.

"I've heard that people impersonate me," he says, drawing on a beer at a Queen St. W. bar. "But I don't know anybody who hates me."

Fraser's wandering eye held steady the day, back in 1993, that he met Ben Brooks, a lanky comic from Nova Scotia with a ton of talent and the attitude to match.

"I heard he was widely hated," recalls Brooks, also 26. "I figured he had to be really good or really awful. Plus, I'm the first person he's liked as much as he likes himself."

Thus was born the comedy sketch duo Joe's Convenience, which plays Yuk Yuk's Superclub, 2335 Yonge St., for a five-night run starting Wednesday. It was a historic day, a moment when two incredibly gargantuan egos embraced to form a force so potent and pleased with itself that it threatened to obliterate all who stood before it.

Soon after genesis, Brooks and Fraser launched an all-out assault on the

complacent Canadian sketch scene.

The bloodletting began with a series of one-night gigs at The Rivoli in 1994. These minor engagements were followed by shots at the '94 and '95 Molson Canadian Comedy Slams.

Their ultimate rise to the top of Canada's sketch comedy scene came during Montreal's 1995 Just For Laughs Festival, when Joe's Convenience eclipsed fellow Toronto sketch troupe Skippy's Rangers and generated major heat with eight blow-out shows at venues ranging from Club Soda to the Comedy Works.

The heat has yet to subside. Last week, Joe's signed a six-month development deal with Lorne Michaels' production company Broadway Video. The deal takes Joe's, which is managed by Canadian comedy spin-meister Willie Mercer, one step closer to its ultimate goal of an eponymous television series. The duo heads to Los Angeles this summer in search of backing from a

Comedy

ANDREW CLARK

U.S. network.

In just under three years, Brooks and Fraser have gone from nothing wannabes to next-big-thing status. They are currently not just the best troupe in Toronto, Joe's Convenience is the best thing going in Canada. What is perhaps more impressive than their body of work is the fact that throughout their ascent, Joe's Convenience has managed to denigrate the rest of the sketch comedy community. They have not only succeeded, but they have succeeded in making other sketch comedians feel small. Joe's Convenience has demonstrated just how corpulent and diseased the bulk of what today passes as sketch comedy really is.

"Sketch comedy is a craft," says Brooks. "It's the art of articulating ob-

servations. We're not going to do what some groups do and resort to stupid gimmicks like sticking baloney on our foreheads."

Adds Fraser. "Anybody who doesn't think I have an ego doesn't know me."

Toronto has a strong sketch comedy lineage: Second City, The Frantics, The Kids in the Hall, The Vacant Lot. This success has bred too much adulation. As a result, most of what gets done is merely poor imitation. Audiences get second-rate SCTV or derivative Vacant Lot. Joe's decided early on to rail against convention. Brooks and Fraser agreed to attack the status quo. If audiences responded, so much the better.

What the pair liked was placing insane characters in real settings. The duo's twist is that their insane characters are in real settings saying real things. For example, a crazy gym teacher with a class of two calls attendance for a class of 30. He is obviously insane but it's the so-called sane characters who end up acting loony. While the kooky teacher shouts out names, his pupils imitate fellow students and eventually each have minor nervous breakdowns. It is a deft use of inversion, perfected by the likes of earlier British icons Beyond the Fringe and Monty Python.

Joe's Convenience also enjoy messing with scene structure. Today, most troupes follow the *Saturday Night Live* model: a "normal" scene is disturbed by a comedic character who upsets the balance. Joe's turn this formula upside down. A sketch will reach its climax and then Joe's will take it into another course, making the first climax into a subplot. They do not curb their imaginations. Anything from world destruction via baking soda to talk-show hypocrisy is fair game.

The mix is augmented by Brooks' and Fraser's talent as performers. Both have exceptional timing and strong character ability. Brooks is the first of Fraser's sketch partners to rival him as a pure performer. In Delaware Water Gap, Fraser was always the obvious top dog. Having an equal, or perhaps superior, partner has forced Fraser to elevate his performance. The pair occasionally use guest comics, like David Hadyn-Jones, to beef up scenes requiring additional numbers.

A strong work ethic is a lynchpin in the Joe's Convenience machine. They take comedy seriously as a business. Brooks and Fraser live, eat and sleep Joe's Convenience. They aim to climb the heap. They aim to follow in the footsteps of other Canadian comedians and conquer the world.

"This business is so competitive," maintains Brooks. "If you want to make it, you have to sacrifice everything. I quit school and I've done nothing but Joe's Convenience since." To achieve this goal, Brooks and Fraser write voraciously. They claim to have more than 600 sketches in their arsenal.

Brooks says it's essential for the pair to keep churning out new ideas. Each Joe's Convenience show has 70 to 85 per cent new sketches. He says performing the same bits ad nauseam is boring. By limiting the Joe's Convenience writing team to only those with whom Brooks and Fraser feel they can work (read: Brooks and Fraser), he says the creative core of the troupe is remains clean.

"We realize that there's nothing new under the sun," says Fraser. "But we don't like to repeat things."

"Maybe that's true," observes Brooks. "But there are things under the sun that can be twisted."