

Opal Divine's

Backpack Picnic

Austin's breakout comedy troupe masters the web

If the rise of YouTube and short-form video sites like SuperDeluxe.com has benefited anyone, it's comedians—particularly those who don't ply their trade in established breeding grounds like Chicago or New York. Austin's OnNetworks.com is one of many new websites changing the status quo thanks to shows like Backpack Picnic, a sketch comedy in the vein of *The State* or *Kids In The Hall* whose tiny bytes of absurdity are tailor-made for the iPod generation. Originated by One Hit Wonder founders Mitch Baker and David Bewley in 2001, Backpack Picnic began life in Austin as The Edmond Bulldogs, making waves at the Out Of Bounds Improv Festival in 2003. The group so impressed OOB organizers Shannon McCormick and Jeremy Lamb that they soon became members, followed by local filmmaker René Pinnell. A pilot for MTV followed in 2005, and while its rejection led to a name change and a lot of expensive conversations with lawyers, the troupe rebounded with OnNetworks, where it quickly became a breakout hit. Just before its appearance at this week's Out Of Bounds, *The A.V. Club* sat down with the members of Backpack Picnic (minus head writer Baker, who lives in Los Angeles) to talk about the transition from stage to film, what makes teenage girls laugh, and whether the Internet is ruining comedy forever.

The A.V. Club: How would you describe Backpack Picnic's sense of humor?

Jeremy Lamb: Gay.

Shannon McCormick: Extra gay.

David Bewley: It's a combination of dumb humor—simple, kicked-in-the-balls stuff—with cleverness. We go for the cheap when it works well, but cleverly.

René Pinnell: We're not super-analytical about it. Basically, if it feels like we're doing something too expected, we'll change it slightly.

SM: There was an old intro to the Bulldogs show that fits pretty well: "Anything that's unexpected—but pleasant!"

AVC: When you craft material, do you have a script that you closely adhere to, or do you have the option to make other choices while you're filming?

RP: It's a little bit of both. Mitch is a really particular writer, and he has a really specific vision in mind when he writes it. Whenever Mitch writes something I'll generally have two reactions. One is I won't really get it, and I'll have to call Mitch to explain it to me. The other—and this happens a lot—is I'll say, "Oh my God. This man has no idea what it's going to take to make a grenade fly through a painting." He'll write things like, "And then Shannon's head explodes." It's fantastic having a writer who doesn't have to deal with that, who has no grasp on how doable things are, because it forces me to figure things out.

JL: And then you find out it's just a Photo-shop filter.

SM: Yeah, it's a patch you can download from Adobe.

RP: Ah yes. The zinger patch.

AVC: Do you do most of your work in a studio?

RP: We're pretty much never in a studio, except for [post-production] with George Morrow, who does the visual effects. He and P.J. Raval, our cinematographer—he's a really critically acclaimed cinematographer, by the way.

SM: The fact that we have one of indie film's premier cinematographers as *our* cinematographer—

JL: Is ridiculous.

RP: The fact that we have George and P.J. speaks to another part of our sensibility, which is that we place as much emphasis on the execution as the actual joke—the art direction, the way it's shot, the sound design.

AVC: For most of you, your background is onstage. Do you prefer working with a live audience to film?

SM: If you're doing something onstage, you get immediate feedback and you know if it's working or not, and that's exhilarating in a way that film never is. Film is like a chore—a pleasant chore. But film also affords you the opportunity to try it again, or try out other possibilities, and on the stage you don't have that luxury.

JL: Film also has greater potential to reach more people. The biggest audience you'll really ever see at a comedy show is, like, 1,000 people, unless it's Steve Martin in his selling-out-stadiums days. With music, a band can record a CD and then someone hears it in Japan, but an improv troupe is only at its full potential live, so it's hard to get recognition.

DB: I love it when we get to do stage shows, but through this process I've found myself more and more comfortable [being on camera]. I'm not sure which one I prefer. Stage is where I came from—

JL: And that's where you'll die!

AVC: What sort of feedback did you get from MTV on the Edmond Bulldogs pilot?

RP: When we first brought it to them they were really excited about it—but of course they still had to test market it. MTV's demographic, unfortunately, tends to be younger females, who didn't exactly get what we were doing. I remember while they were watching it, they had these little knobs they were supposed to turn indicating when they liked something. Pretty much the whole



L to R: Mitch Baker, Jeremy Lamb, René Pinnell, David Bewley, Shannon McCormick.

time it was flatlined. Then we had one skit where Jeremy kept getting hit by a stick. It was the one thing they liked.

AVC: Does MTV still have any sort of ownership of you?

RP: They can't stop us from doing sketch comedy. We just can't use the name The Edmond Bulldogs, and we can't use any of the characters from the pilot.

AVC: So you can't use Stick Guy?

RP: We can't use Stick Guy, but we could probably change his name. Maybe, like, Cinderblock Guy.

SM: Pipe Guy! Gets hit by a pipe.

RP: If you thought Jeremy getting hit with a stick was funny, wait until you see him bludgeoned with a pipe.

AVC: You're part of a new wave of web-based sketch comedy like Super Deluxe and Funny Or Die. How do you think the democratization of comedy on the Internet has affected its overall quality?

JL: I think it brings the average way down. A whole lot of the crap that's on the Internet is god-awful.

SM: But at the same time, it helps break out people who wouldn't be discovered otherwise. People like us who don't live in L.A. and who weren't going to have a show any time soon.

RP: I think that the hope the Internet provides is that of a meritocracy, where you survive on the quality of your work.

SM: Sketch comedy, too, is really a perfect medium for the Internet, because it rolls out in five-minute segments. TV, you have to

package a whole 30-minute show. Now sketches are like pop songs, and they can go out and have a life of their own.

RP: Getting instantaneous feedback is cool too. With a normal TV show you spend two months filming a whole season, and then you put it out and get your feedback, and maybe you make changes to next season—if you're lucky enough to get one. With this, we find out right away and can adjust. There's a lot more of a dialogue with the audience.

AVC: So you actually enjoy having anonymous Internet folk comment on your work?

RP: And then having the ability to do something with that information? Yeah, I think it's amazing. I actually look forward to when it makes its way to someplace other than OnNetworks, and people can be more frank about it. On YouTube, people are a lot more candid. We had one guy called—

Everyone: The Magic Lemon!

RP: He was really hardcore dissing on the show. I liked that. He said the funniest thing—which is why I miss him—about the "Suppression Bakery" sketch. He was like, "I don't see what's funny about this. What's so funny about two cross-dressing men baking cakes made out of rage?"

JL: I was like, read that sentence again and tell me what's *not* funny about that. —Sean O'Neal

Backpack Picnic performs August 31 at the Hideout Theatre as part of the Out Of Bounds Improv Festival And Miniature Golf Tournament. Tickets are \$10 and the show is all-ages.

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