



Michelle Renee Thompson tries to win over the simian judges in "Impress These Apes."

THEATER REVIEW 'Impress These Apes' ★★★

Comedy show is more fun than a barrel of you-know-whats

By **Nina Metz**
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Idiotic but enthralling, "Impress These Apes" might be the best comedy show on the calendar each year.

Though it still flies under the radar in certain quarters, this improv/talent show mash-up is poised to break citywide with its fourth season, which runs Wednesday nights at ComedySportz. A gutsy alternative to the polish of Second City, "Impress These Apes" (from Blew! Productions) traffics in weird originality and risk-taking.

The rowdy beast has been tamed a smidge — the current offering doesn't feel as though all hell could break loose at any moment. But it's rare to stumble upon a show this audacious — this fun — that offers unpredictability and a swiftness to the proceedings. You will laugh, and you will laugh hard (even if the cruddy audio needs tweaking).

Over the course of two months, eight comics, actors and improvisers are tasked with concocting an offbeat "talent" each week, and the results can be elaborate, a twisted cousin to "American Idol" that is both wholesome and completely messed up. The assignment for opening night had the contestants arriving with new lyrics to a popular song, performed to a karaoke backing track.

The stakes are high — egos are on the line — and the creativity can be mind-blowing and strange. Michelle Renee Thompson is African-American, and she brought the

house down with her version of Garth Brooks' "Friends in Low Places": "Well, I ain't really what you'd call the whitest/But I just came down with country-itis."

Kelly Beeman devised a very funny, prop-enhanced bit of self-humiliation about weight gain (No Doubt's "Don't Speak" became "Don't Eat"), and Chelsea Devantez was sublime doofiness belting out an ode to laser tag to the track of Patti LaBelle's "New Attitude."

As always, the judges panel is staffed by apes — looking to crown "the least pitiful human." Their ad-libbed commentary is hilariously sharp. Sucking on his pipe, Captain Apehab (Paul Luikart) happily informed one contestant, "You finished with a surge of misplaced self-esteem." A new addition this year is a redneck ape called Bushmeat (Bryan Bowden), and he got off some of the best one-liners of the night: "I liked it because it reminded me of prom," he told a teary, make-up-smearing contestant.

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When: Through Nov. 4

Where: ComedySportz Theatre, 929 W. Belmont Ave.

Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes

Tickets: \$10 at 773-549-8080 or comedysportzchicago.com