

Spotlight On...

Q&A with Liv Cummins



Liv Cummins

You've hosted your variety show, "Saturday Night Liv," for six years. How did you get started?

My husband [Sandy McKnight] and I started a semblance of the show in New York City. It was so great; we loved the concept. When we moved north, we wanted to see what we could do here. How it works is that we take this bizarre, motley crew of random people, who might not have other places to perform. Anyone can fit in, if they're good at what they do. Each show is different, featuring different variety acts and musical acts. At the core of it is our Really Convincing Players. They're actors who do original comedy sketches, mostly written by Sandy. He's done work for MTV, VH1 and other TV shows. I'm the Carol Burnett of the show, and I'm one of the honorary members of the troupe. In May, I was on stage for a few minutes playing Marilyn Monroe. It was my grandest moment. I don't normally stick out so much—literally and figuratively.

Why a variety show?

Sandy and I are Renaissance artists. We both do so many things. When we started thinking about putting something together, our first question was, "What show gives us a chance to do that? And that and that and that?" The answer was a variety show. Sandy is a lover of original *Ed Sullivan Show*; I'm a lover of the original *Carol Burnett Show*. So part

of our impetus was that we wanted a showcase for our own work, no matter what we generated. The second reason we thought a variety show would be perfect is that we know all these incredible artists. We thought, "How can we help support them?"

Have you built an audience?

It's always a challenge to find people who care about the work you're doing. We find building a consistent audience is challenging, partly because the area is so spread out. The weird part of it is that whenever we do a new show, people love it. People of all ages—children, grandmothers—will come up to us and say, "I loved this, I laughed so hard." There's such effusive reaction that we think, "Wow, we have to do this." And that takes us through the times when not as many people show up. Plus, as an artist, you don't know how you're touching people. You don't know how it's falling on their ears and hearts.

Who's the Columbia Arts Team and what do you do?

It's our community arts nonprofit, made up of me, Sandy and Christina Dellea, who we teamed up with in 2004. We produce *Saturday Night Liv*, as well as coffeehouse concerts, a songwriting workshop, locally performed musicals, workshops for kids and other programming.

You and your husband collaborate closely. How does that work out?

Well, I'm from Minneapolis: I grew up among conservative, loving Protestant people. We were a Garrison Keillor type of household. Sandy is from Brooklyn, so he's always mocking me for my Minnesotan ways. If you're at a four-way stop in Minnesota, all the drivers are like, "No, you, no, you," and we're all still sitting there. So he mocks me, but at the heart of it, he and I are so similar. Now that we're working

together, we're always reading each other's minds. We work together well; our strengths and talents balance each other. And I'm lucky that he understands my needs, weird fetishes, creative impulses.

What other projects do you have going on?

I'm at the point where I really love everything I'm doing. I love *everything*. I perform, I write, I direct shows. Right now, I'm working on a musical, called *Vanishing Point*, about three women who vanished: Agatha Christie, Aimee Semple McPherson and Amelia Earhart. The play looks at what drove them all, historically speaking. It's an historical fantasy that's very funny, but also serious.

Who are your comedy role models?

Carol Burnett, Lucille Ball, Gilda Radner. And Gloria Steinem—she was a writer on a TV show in the late 60s and early 70s. I saw her in person on a panel at the Museum of Television & Radio. She was funny and laid back; you'd imagine that someone who's accomplished so much would be strident. She's not.

Are there stereotypes related to funny women?

Yes. I guess the biggest one is that women stand-ups aren't funny. It's a stereotype, but one that I've actually found to be true! Men have dominated the field; they're more irreverent, more able to be critical. With women, it's different. Think of Ellen DeGeneres. She didn't take that critical angle; she takes a self-deprecating one. There's this early skit where she's making a phone call to God. She says, "God, hi, it's Ellen. You know, Ellen DeGeneres." It's clear He doesn't know which Ellen it is. I think when women try to be 'male' funny, it comes off as weird. Each person has to find her own style. Be yourself, if that's funny. If it's not, you're out of luck.