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Kid Comics

Some people are just born funny. With pro coaching, younger set unleash their inner Seinfeld.

By LILY OEI

Walking down the street the other day, a guy calls out, "Hey Afro, spare some change?" quips Alejandro Kolleeny, a lanky comedian with a full head of gravity-defying curls. "If you're an actor and you see Martin Scorsese on the street, are you going to yell, 'Hey, Eyebrows, think you can put me in a movie?'"

Kolleeny is 15 years old. While many other kids his age are enjoying their New York weekend outdoors, he's content to spend his Sunday afternoon in the basement lounge of the Gotham Comedy Club. At the Kids 'N Comedy show, Kolleeny isn't even the youngest comic to take the stage.

Run by husband-and-wife team Jo Ann Grossman and Stu Morden since 1996, Kids 'N Comedy provides a year-round schedule of classes, workshops and performances at the same club where auditions for "Late Night With Conan O'Brien" and Comedy Central are sometimes held. It's just one of many programs that offer comedy classes to kids 10 and up, many of whom commute in from outside New York.

Could the next Billy Crystal or Woody Allen be among them? Scouts from Nickelodeon have been known to attend Kids 'N Comedy's shows, and "She's the Man" star Amanda Bynes was discovered at a similar comedy camp hosted by the Laugh Factory in Los

JUST KIDDING:

Clockwise from top, junior comics Emily Carpenter, Ryan Drum, Luke Hofmaier and Alejandro Kolleeny work the stage at the Kids 'N Comedy show.



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Angeles. Plus shows such as ABC Family's "Whose Line Is It Anyway" have been an enormous influence, teachers say.

Classes meet for eight-week sessions so kids develop enough material for a routine. Workshops allow more seasoned performers to refine their acts before professionals. The pros' notes are gentle, but not patronizing — definitely not the stuff of "American Idol" judges.

Ryan Drum, 11, has some material about "Nanny 911." Instructor Darlene Violette helps him fill it out and encourages him to act like he's having a conversation with the audience.

The following Sunday at the show, not only is Drum's content stronger, his delivery is spot on. Post-performance, a beaming Drum says he's been practicing all week in his living room with a karaoke machine.

For kids more interested in the craft of improvisation, there is Gotham City Improv and the Children Aid Society's New Acting Company. Gotham City Improv doesn't always have a teen option on their schedule, so they will occasionally sign up for regular classes.

"We have a 17-year-old kid ready to take Level 4," says Brad Barton, org's artistic director.

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For participants, the goal is not always

Hollywood. Every improv coach has a story about misfits clicking together, wallflowers blossoming and class clowns finding an outlet for their energy — making for happy kids and happier parents.

“Basic improv teaches you to be in the moment, to take risks and to focus on the stage so you make every-

one look great,” says Hal Peller, an improv coach who has worked with teens.

It's for these reasons, says Matthew Dorter of the New Acting Company's Laughter Lab, that kids take to improv much quicker than adults. “The children have the ability to play and embrace their environment,” says Dorter, who works with kids 10-14. “They're old enough

to understand and young enough to embrace it. For adults, all that's been trained out of them.”

The kid comics run through a gamut of topics: parents, school, the occasional Bush impression. Says Gotham City's Barton: “We aim for PG-13, and it's more commercially acceptable to do so. But sometimes I'm surprised by the social commentary: politics, religion, life and death — shared, universal experiences.”

At Sunday's performance the material gets very self-referential. “I can do anything standing up here. I love the power,” observes high school junior Max Fox onstage. “I'm in the corner of a room telling jokes — but it's OK because there are drapes behind me.”

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TEEN ROUTINE:

Max Fox, right, and Kyle Cardi-Kinzer get a chance to riff onstage.



RESOURCES

Kids 'N Comedy, www.kidsncomedy.com

Hal Peller, www.improvworkshop.com/Teen_Workshop.htm

New Acting Company's Laughter Lab, www.childrensaid.society.org/gvc/nac/classes

Sam Lally, www.doramae.com/improv.html