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From the IWU Underground to LA:
Founding Alumni of Jm7* Share Insights on Being Young in Hollywood

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Annie Girard '00 shows her stuff as an actor, writer and producer in Hollywood.

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – For more than a decade, Illinois Wesleyan students have been able to duck into the Underground – down the steps from the DugOut in the Memorial Center – for a weekly laugh with the student improvisational group Jm7*. When it started, the group was a sounding board, an outlet and a bonding experience for the early members. It also gave several of them the confidence to take on Hollywood after graduation.

Three of the first members of Jm7* shared their stories of what the group meant to them, and how the lessons of those early days helped them traverse the wilds of LA as a young actor.

The beginning

Jm7* started as a sketch group in 1997 with Scott Powers '00, Mike Rich '00 and Sam Kenny '99. "Mike and Sam were roommates and brought me in," said Powers, a theater and history double major. The trio performed all over campus before settling into the black-box theater, known as the Phoenix, just off of the Underground. Weekly performances included sketches written by the trio, who gave themselves the name Joker McGee and the 7 Lousy Good for Nothings, or Jm7*. The summer of 1998, Powers and Kenny attended the Improv Olympics in Chicago. When they returned to IWU in the fall, they incorporated improvisation into the performances. "As I began to write and direct more plays, the sketches took a back seat to improv, which takes less prep work. Eventually the sketches fell away altogether in favor of improv," said Powers.

The group realized they wanted to expand and include more members, one of whom was Michael Balsley '99, a theater and English writing double major who was also IWU Student Senate president and a writer for *The Argus*. "Scott was a bit like a directorial pied piper," said Balsley. "We became a tight group, working together, acting and directing each other's shows. We did everything together."

Michael Balsley '99 (right) poses with fellow alumnus Tom Taylor before an IWU performance of "The

Crucible" in 1997.

Powers recalls doing many productions over his years at IWU, from small one-act scripts to original plays he wrote and directed. “It was a time to push yourself, to find out what you could and shouldn’t do,” he said. “The concept of experimentation that I learned at IWU has helped me throughout my career.”

Fellow theater major Annie Girard ’00 also joined the group. “Nice of the boys to let a few girls in, eh?” she joked. “I think we practically lived in the Phoenix, producing our own shows and doing improv.”

The group performed weekly in the Phoenix until a call threatened to shut down Jm7* performances in 1998. “One night we were packed with about 85 people in the audience, the next day I got a call from the fire marshal telling me the capacity for the Phoenix was 40 people,” said Powers. But, he noted, losing space in the Phoenix turned out for the best. “We moved right outside the theater to the Underground, where we could easily have more than 100 people watch us. So we got even bigger.”

Power recalls the nervous energy he loved as the cast descended in the elevator to make their entrance to the Underground. “The place was so packed that people would sit on the stairs to the DugOut. There was an electricity that was palpable,” Powers said. “Those shows were definitely the best times we had at IWU.”

By the time Powers, Balsley and Girard graduated, Jm7* had grown to include between 10 and 12 members.

Finding their way in LA

After graduation, many Jm7* members felt they had a choice of location to pursue their acting and directing dreams – New York, LA or Chicago.

Girard headed for Hollywood. “I figured my youth would be more of a commodity in LA, so I packed up my car, put my well-lubed monologue in my pocket, and drove out here,” she said, adding, “I think I’ve used my monologue twice since I came here, so much of the lubing was probably not worth it.”

When Girard arrived in LA, she found work acting – mostly in small parts on TV shows such as “Reno! 911,” and writing for shows such as “Blue Collar TV.” She also appeared in late night sketches for shows such as “Jimmy Kimmel Live!” and the “Late, Late Show with Craig Ferguson.” Late night was a surprise for Girard. “It is so much like live theater. There is a live audience, a hectic pace and no retakes. People are behind you yelling, ‘Go! Go!’ But when you’re on stage, you suddenly need to tone it down and act for a smaller screen.” She paused for a moment. “Of course, I know that *now*. When I was there, I was acting for theater. I watch myself now and think, ‘Oh boy. Guess that was a *little* much.’ You live and learn.”

Scott Powers '99 (center) and Balsley (right) take in a Cubs game at Dodger Stadium with fellow Jm7 alumna Kate (Walker) Szczudlo '00.*

Girard has worked with some known names along the way. “I did get tortured and murdered by Daniel Baldwin – on stage, of course,” she said of her part in the 2008 dark comedy “A Darker Reality,” which she calls “traumatizing and hilarious all at once.” She also appeared in “Crank: High Voltage” with Jason Statham. “I shot a huge semi-automatic weapon in 8-inch stilettos – always great shoes for combat,” she added.

Discovering she is most at home when combining writing, acting and producing, Girard developed the production of “Girl Camp” for the Comedy Central Stage that became a 2007 film. “LA is a surprisingly small town when it comes to the comedy scene,” she said. “You get to know everyone and everyone, hopefully, gets to know you.”

Powers agreed that creating a network is vital in Hollywood. “There are two ways things happen in Hollywood,” he said. “You have a connection who makes it happen, or you make it happen for yourself.”

After graduation from IWU, Powers went to Chicago and became an assistant to the director at Second City. “There were some amazingly talented people there, like Jack McBrayer,” said Powers of the actor best known as the page on the TV show “30 Rock.” “You could tell he was going to explode on the Hollywood scene. He was so good.”

After six months, Powers made the move to LA and taught improvisation for five years at the Theater of Arts, while pouring himself into writing and directing for various shows in small theaters. He founded an improv group called Old Man Buckle, and a video sketch group called Cultural Revolutions. “It was a lot like my time with Jm7* with weekly shows,” he said. Then, three years ago, Powers realized he was using the weekly run of the shows as a crutch. “I was doing what I had always done because I could do it. I was keeping myself from doing what I really wanted to try – screenwriting.”

Powers quit teaching and poured himself into writing, supporting himself with jobs at restaurants. “Everyone has something they do when they are not acting or directing,” he said. After searching for financing for his screenplay, Powers and a friend finally decided to produce the film on their own. In what he calls “guerilla movie-making,” Powers spent last July shooting the movie “Insomnium,” and recently was approved for financing to finish the film. “It’s been an amazing experience,” he said. “I feel like I’ve been back at IWU, learning as I go.”

Balsley headed out east after graduation to earn his master’s in fine arts degree in acting from Tisch School of the Arts at NYU. Then he worked in regional theater productions around the country before heading to LA and joining the award-winning Pacific Resident Theater. “We have people from 22 to 75 years old, and they are all artists who are committed to their craft,” said Balsley, who calls the company his “home base” in LA. “It reminds me of my time at IWU, with a great group of dedicated and talented people.”

Balsley (center, standing on trunk) in a performance of “The Hasty Heart” with the Pacific Resident Theater in LA.

Having appeared in plays such as “The Browning Version” and “The Hasty Heart,” TV shows such as “Numb#rs” and “Medium,” and the 2005 movie “The War Within,” Balsley finds it impossible to choose a favorite genre as an actor. “Asking someone to choose between theater, TV and film is like asking a parent to choose between his or her spouse and child,” said Balsley. “Theater does require a huge time commitment, and not much in the way of monetary reward, but there is the instant gratification of a live audience, and the chance to bond with cast mates.” TV and film also offer rewards, he said. “You are only on the job for a day, but it pays about 100 times better than the stage in LA, so you find things to love about both TV and theater.”

Balsley is also a teacher at a private high school in LA,

where he founded the visual and performing arts department. “The head of my school wanted someone in the field who is actively working as a professional,” he said. “So I am encouraged to do a play or shoot a commercial and bring that experience to the classroom. It’s the best of both worlds.”

Along with their fond memories of working together on Jm7*, Powers, Girard and Balsley remain in touch. “Usually I run into Annie at an audition,” said Balsley, who calls his fellow Jm7* alumni “incredibly talented.” Girard said she is working to get a writers’ group going that would workshop new ideas. “I’m trying to get Michael and Scott to join,” she added. “We need a project where the three of us can work together again,” Powers agreed. “I’d love to see that energy again.”

A word of advice

When offering advice to young people venturing to Hollywood, Girard keeps it simple. “Work begets work in LA,” she said, noting she landed most of her roles through people she knew or with whom she took classes over the years. “I wish someone would just pay me to take classes,” she added with a sigh, listing among her courses those on horseback riding, combat training and handguns. “Anything that will open up a role for me.”

Powers sees his own journey as a lesson for others. “Put yourself out there. Do what you want to do,” he said. “It might not be on a huge scale, but make it yours.” He also advises young people to arrive in LA with some patience. “Prepare to stay awhile,” said Powers. “So many people come out here and give up after six months and move home. If you don’t stay, you don’t make connections, or grow in the way you need to grow. Stay committed.”

Annie Girard

An added piece of advice? “Get good insurance. I’m not kidding,” Powers said. “You would not believe how many people have to go home because they suddenly find themselves in huge debt over something relatively small medically.”

Balsley noted young actors should not get frustrated if they land smaller roles. “I’ve had a few of those one-named parts in film – Officer Mike, FBI Agent 1, Lead Detective – and those smaller roles go with the territory. There are no illusions about the tough reality of being an actor,” he said. “Every step is a learning opportunity, and working is how you get more work. Period.” For those worried too much about typecasting, Balsley recommends working in both film and with theater. “It’s easier to reinvent yourself from production to production in theater,” he said.

The bottom line for all three original members of Jm7* is to take a tip from their early days: find what you love and find others who share your passion. “Meet as many people as you can,” said Girard. “Heck, when you get here, give me a call.”

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