



Winter 2013

Laugh and Learn

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Recommended Citation

Julian '07, Sarah Zeller (2013) "Laugh and Learn," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 4 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol21/iss4/4>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Brooke Trantor '11 pursues a lifelong dream as a student in the legendary Second City improv troupe's Hollywood conservatory.

By SARAH (ZELLER) JULIAN '07

Devoting your life to comedy takes a serious amount of work. That's what Brooke Trantor '11, found when she moved to Los Angeles and jumped headfirst into an acting career one year ago.

This winter, the IWU acting major will graduate from Second City Hollywood's Conservatory, where she has studied improvisational and sketch comedy in addition to working as a producer, intern, house manager and box office employee.

Launched in Chicago's Old Town neighborhood in 1959, the legendary Second City improv group has expanded to L.A. and Toronto. Its alumni constitute an A-list of comedians, including John Belushi, Mike Myers, Stephen Colbert, Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Tina Fey. It has also established training centers taught by improv pros, many who are current Second City performers. Trantor successfully auditioned for the L.A. training center's conservatory, which offers advanced study in ensemble improvisation.

"There is nothing else for me," she says of acting. "This has always been my whole life, but it is so incredibly hard." In addition to her many roles at Second City, Trantor works six to seven days a week as a waitress. "It's definitely humbling, and I hope to always be humbled," she says. "To really ride the ride out here and start from nothing — I hope never to lose it."

For Trantor, acting has been a lifelong pursuit. She first became involved in theatre at age 3 with encouragement from her mother. "My parents saw how insanely dramatic I was as a child and thought I had to find a creative way to deal with it," she says. "I knew at a very young age that that's where I was supposed to be."

As a junior high school student, she was already involved with a community theatre in her hometown of Quincy, Ill., when a new director was hired. Dominic Cattero, who graduated from IWU in 2003, helped pique her interest both in improv comedy and in Illinois Wesleyan's School of Theatre Arts. Improv classes with Cattero were "seriously the best thing that's ever happened to me," she says. "Growing up in the theatre world, I was concerned about what people thought about my performances. Improv is an art form where you have to let that go."

Improv has had a profound impact on Trantor. "Improvisation is an unbelievably freeing discipline of theatre," Cattero says. "A group of people come together to entirely create a piece of art in an instant. The art lies in the full creation of all elements and the ability to sacrifice one's own self on behalf of the troupe itself, among many other things."



Trantor has her photo snapped at the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

The experience forced Trantor to stop taking herself so seriously, she says, recalling one class in particular. "(Cattero) demanded that I go on stage and cluck around like a chicken. As a 12-year-old, you want to be cool and want to be liked. I was so embarrassed, and I started crying. He just said, 'I know you can do this.' It was this moment when I realized it didn't matter, that life was about having fun."

Today, Trantor looks up to others who have come to that same realization. The late Gilda Radner — an original *Saturday Night Live* cast member and a Second City graduate — is one of those inspirations. "There was a woman, a beautiful woman, who was not afraid to be ugly on stage and portray characters — she's a huge idol in my eyes. I always think of her and her boldness and absolute confidence and dismissal of fear."

IWU's School of Theatre Arts gave her confidence to pursue her passions, Trantor says. "Wesleyan is an amazing school and one that I'll be proud of forever. I was always supported in decisions I was making and hard times I was going through, by friends and especially by the staff. That's the greatest part of Theatre Arts; they're working professionals who know what it's like. They've been there; they have so much not only book knowledge, but life knowledge to give you."

Being at IWU also allowed Trantor the opportunity to participate in Jm7*, a campus improv troupe that she eventually led. The rigorous schedule — improv rehearsal up to four times a week, teaching improv classes and performing shows — prepared her for her busy life as an alumna. "It was a lot of prep, but it was so much fun," she says. "It was never a chore to go."

Assistant Professor of Theatre Arts Scott Susong believes that Trantor “is doing what it takes” to build her career. “Pursuing a professional career as an actor is difficult and demands huge risks in order to reap big rewards. She moved to California without anyone other than some alumni connections, a subtlety and the tenacity of purpose it takes to make it. She has navigated her first couple of years out of school with grace and dignity and is really beginning to make a name for herself in the sketch comedy and improv world.”

Although making it big in Hollywood may seem to be a long shot, Susong says that isn’t always so. “So many people dwell on the impossibilities of a successful performance career, but the truth is someone has to make it, and someone will get the opportunity to let their talent shine on a national or international stage,” he says. “We work hard to equip our students to be ready when the opportunity arises and to understand that a life in the arts is a life as a lifelong learner.”



As a senior acting major, she was active in the Jm7 improv troupe.*

Cattero sees the same qualities. “I believe she is just scratching the surface of her possibilities,” he says. “She will continue to grow, and even greater things will come to her. She has the potential to be absolutely unstoppable, as she has turned into a fearless performer. I have full confidence that whatever Brooke puts her mind to she can accomplish.”

Trantor was recently accepted into the Groundlings School, a Los Angeles improv program whose graduates include Will Ferrell, Kristen Wiig and Phil Hartman. “I hope to continue to hone my craft,” she says. “You have to have the confidence in yourself. I hope to continue in the comedy world, and obviously I’ll keep doing that, but I also want to dive into TV and writing and submerge myself in everything that’s going on around me.”

Despite the challenges, Trantor believes her move to California has been extremely worthwhile. “My advice for anyone who’d want to be out here — and there’s nothing else in the world they’d want to do — is just do it,” she says. “Every day has been a positive experience, and I’ve learned a lot being out here. It just takes a lot of work, a lot of patience and positivity. A little bit will take you a long way.”

On waitressing and choosing happiness

On her blog (at brooketrantor.wordpress.com) Trantor recently wrote about the challenges and rewards of “paying the bills” as a waitress while she pursues her acting career in Hollywood. Below is an excerpt:

Since moving to Los Angeles, I have met so many actors who let the fact that they have to have a “day job” hinder their happiness. “I will only be happy once I am paid to do what I love.” I get it ... that would make me extremely happy as well. But here is the thing, what amount of money from acting will make you happy? Or what project will make you the happiest? Even the most highly paid actors in the industry talk about the uncertainty of where their next project will come from. Heck, Adele kept her job at a record

store after her album 19 was released because she just was not sure if people would like it, and she did not want to lose her day job.

Here is what I say: I am an ACTOR who has to wait tables to pay my bills. First and foremost, I am an actress. In order to live this lifestyle, I have had to make sacrifices to get what I want, and to get to where I am today. I choose to make the best of every situation, and waiting tables teaches me a lot. It helps me learn how to deal with people and how to build relationships (nothing is more heart-warming than having regulars come in to ask to sit in your section because they like you or find you insanely hilarious). It has helped me learn to not be frivolous with my money and learn how to save for important things such as head shots, acting classes, workshops and very important things like my future!

It is easy to focus on negative energy around us; it is ALL around us. Working in the service industry, this seems especially easy to come by: people not wanting to work in a restaurant, people who are jaded after having worked in a restaurant for years, customers who have had a bad day and wish to blame it on you.

I have also met awesome people at my job, both fellow employees and customers; they constantly support me and encourage me, which is something we all need to keep pushing us! Like I said, I have rough days too, but if we can really focus on choosing to be happy, happiness will surround us. And yes, this is easier said than done, but practice, and it does get so much easier! Do not let life determine your happiness. Be happy, and live your life! — *Brooke Trantor*

TO VISIT BROOKE TRANTOR'S WEBSITE, [CLICK HERE.](#)

TO VISIT THE IWU SCHOOL OF THEATRE ARTS WEBSITE, [CLICK HERE.](#)