

The Ant Endures

Matthew Copeland

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The Ant Hall (2320 Caniff Street in Hamtramck, MI) © Matthew Copeland

Planet Ant Theatre is a true survivor and no stranger to the many obstacles that face a non-profit community of creatives striving toward a common goal. After more than 25 years in operation, the Ant boasts the longest running improv (short for ‘improvisational’) comedy show in the Detroit area, which takes place every Monday night. To top it

off, the Monday improv show has admitted guests for only five dollars every week since it’s christening in 1999. That makes it the single most cost-effective laugh currently available for Detroiters. Improv is only one of the many offerings at this performance-art destination, which maintains a full schedule of shows, events, and classes.

I connected over the phone with the managing director of Planet Ant, Andy Reid. In this conversation, he shared more about how the theatre navigated the pandemic—from the initial shock, through the struggle of maintaining a connection with fans and students online, and the eventual re-opening and rebirth of Planet Ant.

“People were starting to get nervous,” says Reid, in regards to the genesis of the COVID-19 pandemic, “watching the news, and watching it spread. Like, is this really happening? And over that next week, it just kept getting more and more real.”

Reid taught Planet Ant’s final class on March 12th, 2021, and by the morning of March 13th the decision to close the theatre doors was official.

“It was very clear, we cannot morally keep our doors open,” he says. “We can’t safely have people in our building when we know this is happening.”

The pandemic hit at a time when the theatre was already in a state of transition. After 21 years operating exclusively out of the Black Box Theater, the Planet Ant team then purchased the Ant Hall (across the street from the Black Box) in February of 2016, bringing three new stages into the mix and ushering in a period of growth and change. The main stage in the new hall is a sprawling raised structure encompassing the entire south wall and giving the performances a sense of scale and flow which the smaller Black Box Theatre sometimes struggled to achieve. The building also includes

a smaller, more intimate stage in what's known as The Independent Comedy Club. Throw in the stage nestled in the moody digs of the Ghostlight Bar (which hosts some of the best new musicians coming out of Detroit), and we have all the ingredients for a true-to-form playhouse of creativity.

"I don't know if we will ever really accurately know the effect that the last year-and-a-half has had on local live performance, local live art, and entertainment," says Reid, "because I can't even imagine how many places, just like Planet Ant, all over the country, will never be back again."

Planet Ant, however, did not stand idly by while the world was flipped upside down. They leaned into their online efforts like never before, finding success with their streaming shows and podcasts, while continuing to offer sketch and improv classes remotely.

"We had two whole groups for our sketch writing make it all the way through the curriculum digitally—virtually," Reid says. "They went all the way through the program and now we have an opportunity to put their show up."

Unlike improv comedy, which is unscripted, sketch comedy involves a group of actors performing short scripted scenes (usually under ten minutes in length). Several sketches may be compiled into a larger show, where a running theme (referred to as a 'runner') is established in order to bring all the sketches into a cohesive vision.

The Ant used many creative methods to engage their audience during quarantine, even letting select guest-comics take over the Planet Ant Instagram account to share unique posts and stories for the fans at home. Unfortunately, the pressures of the pandemic forced the Planet Ant team to end their lease with the Black Box Theater.

"It's sad," says Reid, "that was the Ant's home for a quarter of a century."

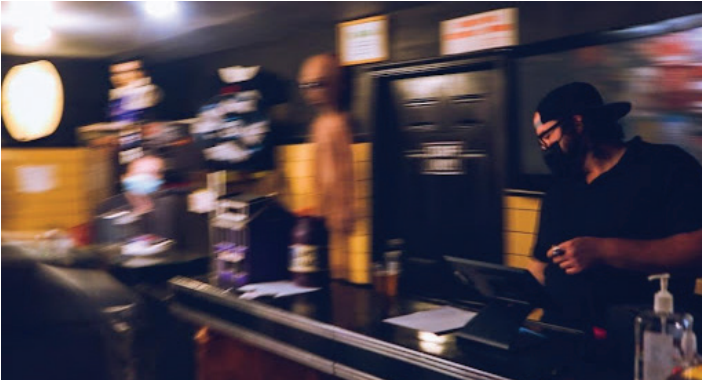
Moving forward, all performances will be held exclusively at the Ant Hall which re-opened its doors to the public this year (2021), the weekend after Labor Day. They've been very careful about adhering to Coronavirus guidelines; a proof of vaccine and picture ID are required to enter the theatre, and masks are worn by the audience to ensure the comfort of all present.



Devin Rosni (left) and Jared Simard (right), warming up the audience © Matthew Copeland



The Farm Team sets the scene. From left: Achyut Vemuri, Andi Maziarz, and Ellen Stachowicz © Matthew Copeland



Jimi Murray attending the box office at the Ant Hall © Matthew Copeland

Reid on returning to live events, “at a certain point, we knew we could figure out a way to do it smartly and safely.”

He goes on to say, “we have three stages in here, and each stage has a specific voice, purpose, and goal. Coming back, we’re going to make each one of our three stages in Ant Hall as best as they possibly can be.”

Andy Reid’s journey into performance art began nearly 7 years ago. While living in Ann Arbor and working as a sports-journalist for The Wolverine magazine, he decided to indulge his curiosity for improv and signed up for a class at Planet Ant.



Andy Reid on stage at the Ant © Matthew Copeland

“I was looking for something to do outside of work,” he explains, “and a way to meet funny people and I found the Ant online. I knew what improv was, and I knew that I wanted to give it a try.”

He came, he saw, and a fire for performance was lit inside Reid. He never turned back, and he’s now a staple in the Detroit improv community. Reid’s talent as a performer is nat



Shawn Handlon observes as Lauren Bickers plays a potato-chucking adolescent © Matthew Copeland



Members of the Home Team. From left: Mike McGettigan, Shawn Handlon, Nuverre Naami, Tony Agusty © Matthew Copeland

ural, unique, and sometimes intense. He listens to his cast-mates, always following the story and adding useful material into the mix. Reid deploys a wide range of characters and personalities, transitioning between scenes with the skill of a well-honed improviser.

So far, the return of the Ant has gone swimmingly, and a night of laughter is a welcome reprieve after the difficult period of evolution that we were thrust into by the pandemic. Improv comedy is an artistic expression that has the rare ability to mirror current events in a humorous, spontaneous way which is often unforgiving. During improv shows, the audience usually becomes a participant, giving suggestions and playing along with the actors on stage. It's this comradery between performers and viewers that helps inspire some of the sketches and written material that ends up in the scripted shows.

For more information about Planet Ant and the full schedule of events and offerings, head to www.planetant.com

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