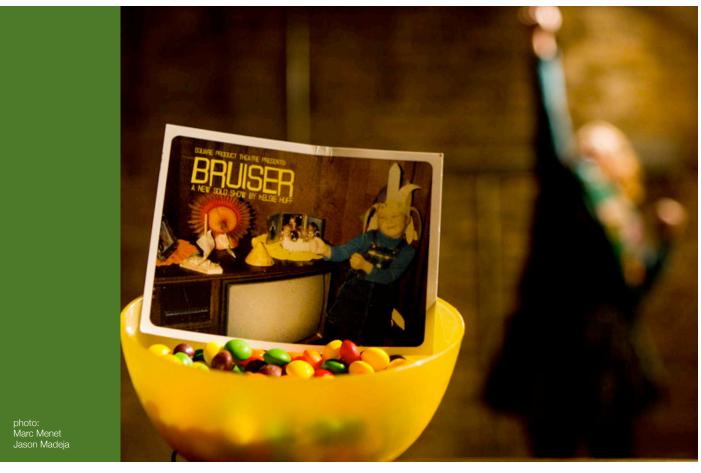
BRUISER: ARTICLES



Chicago Stage Review Bruiser: Tales from a Traumatized Tomboy

By J.Scott Hill

Kelsie Huff is a Chicagobased comedian who has made a departure from her usual stand-up and ventured into that ineffable realm called "solo performance." Solo performance is often difficult to categorize. For example, Christopher Titus, John Leguizamo, Spalding Gray, and David Sedaris all have performed the same general type of autobiographical solo material; yet, while doing so, they are considered a standup comic, an actor, a performance artist, and an author giving a staged

reading, respectively. I don't know what to call Kelsie Huff's solo performance piece, *Bruiser: Tales from a Traumatized Tomboy*, other than a one-person show — and a howling success.

Bruiser tells the end of writer/performer Kelsie Huff's childhood in three parts. First, Huff relives some of her time as a Girl Scout, those last days before boys began to matter. Then, she skates through an awkward puberty, during which her best friend was

the most important person in her life. Finally, Huff is off to church camp where she first turned a mature gaze upon organized religion, ethics, and what counts toward being a good person.

Bruiser is a collection of some pivotal moments from Kelsie Huff's tweenage angst-y years, like time-lapse footage of her chrysalis. If Bruiser sounds like Kelsie Huff: The Lifetime Original Movie starring Tori Spelling as Kelsie Huff and (cont.)

that blonde girl from <u>iCarly</u> as Young Kelsie, it isn't. This is unflinching, thoughtful, and relentless self-reflection matched with master storytelling: poignant at times, yet always achingly funny. Huff creates a cast of fully realized characters who are loveable, quirky, and hateful — sometimes, all three simultaneously.

Oftentimes, when faced with a show that is purported to be based on actual events, an audience can get caught up in a struggle to weigh out what counts as fact and what counts as dramatic license. *Bruiser* creates a sense of perfect verisimilitude. Whether or not the new girl, or the boy at the roller rink, or the camp director's daughter are fabrications, composites, or impersonations, they are as familiar as the paneling in your parents' finished basement.

We laugh with Kelsie Huff. We laugh at Kelsie Huff. Whether Huff is highbrow or lowbrow, droll or goofy, I don't think there is a line she won't cross, or a taboo she won't break in service of an honest laugh. Yet, she is scatological without being puerile, witty without being smug. The frequent and furious laughs are organic to the stories, laughs earned by Huff at every turn. *Bruiser* never stoops to become a collection of superfluous gags and one-liners.

Bruiser: Tales from a Traumatized Tomboy is an irresistible glimpse into the backstory of a comedian, a tantalizing look at the moments that warped a child's perspective enough to give her the ability to find humor in the face of dysfunction. As a writer and a performer, Kelsie Huff is endearing, engrossing, and brilliant. Plus, she brings snacks.

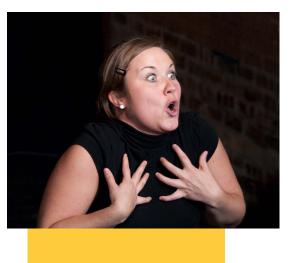
DO NOT MISS the opportunity to go back to middle school for and evening with Kelsie Huff in her one-person triumph.

4 out of 4 stars.











Chicago Sun-Times

Kelsie Huff's vivid past inspires comic present in "BRUISER"

By Mary Houlihan

Comedian Kelsie Huff grew up in Richmond, a small town in McHenry County northwest of Chicago, where she was a member of a large extended family that pretty much lived by one rule: You live here, you die here, you never leave.

But Huff knew from an early age that she wanted a bigger, better and funnier future. Richmond is the kind of town where everyone knows your business. So Huff made it her business to be an observant child.

It is from this sometimes dark history that Huff pulls inspiration for her solo shows. Her 2005 show, "Huffs," was "dark and personal." She takes a different route with "BRUISER: Tales from a Traumatized Tomboy," which she says is "much more playful."

Huff admits she comes from a "wacky family."

"They all have their own unique take on life," she said, with a knowing laugh. "I'm sort of blessed and cursed. I could talk about them forever."

After debuting "BRUISER" at the 2010 Boulder International Fringe Festival, Huff brings it to Chicago for a monthlong run at Gorilla Tango Theatre.

Huff draws inspiration from a cast of characters and experiences, ranging from her fearless childhood friend Nicole ("my inspiration for being a tomboy") and her truck drivin' grandma to her stint with the Girl Scouts and a church camp where she was harassed by the cool kids.

"It's all about how I became a stronger, independent person through the influence of these strong women who really knew who they were," Huff said.

As a child, Huff would often ease the tension at home with humor.

"It becomes part your personality," she said

Class-clown status soon followed. She remembers watching Eddie Murphy's "Delirious" when she way too young to even get all the jokes.

"I would perform parts of it for kids at school," Huff said, laughing. "Including all the colorful language."

After high school, Huff left Richmond to study theater and radio at Columbia College Chicago, where a teacher, solo artist Stephanie Shaw, encouraged her to develop her own work. Huff eventually wound up at The Second City Conservatory, where she met Amy Sumpter, with whom she developed two sketch shows, "Children of the Absurd" and "10% Less Fat."

"It was there that I learned to write with a partner and open up and say yes to new ideas and experiences," Huff, 30, recalled. "And also to just play around and find people you can really connect with."

Recently, Huff has been dabbling in standup comedy at local coffeehouses and bookstores. She's trying to blend it with her solo work. The bar scene, she says, has "no patience for a story. It's all about the immediate punch line."

Huff also is the host of "the kates," a show featuring female comedians and storytellers that takes place on the last Saturday of the month at the Book Cellar in Lincoln Square.

"We play with storytelling and comedy," Huff said. "I'm shocked by how many women want to be part of this."

Huff does occasionally go home to visit her family. She debuted both her solo shows in Richmond; most of her relatives are very supportive.

"I have to give them props for that," Huff said. "You know, you grow up and want to escape and then realize it's not as bad as you think it was. But I must say they are still rockin' those '80s hairstyles. Some things just don't change."

Chicago Stage Review Variety Meets - Comedian Kelsie Huff

By J. Scott Hill

It seems impossible to see much standup in Chicago without seeing comedian Kelsie Huff. Anywhere there is a cabaret, showcase, underground standup show, or evening of women-incomedy, Kelsie Huff is there, onstage, making with the funny. Recently, she took some time out of her hectic performance schedule to have a conversation with **Chicago Stage**Review about her art, her history, and how they intersect in her latest one-person show BRUISER: Tales from a Traumatized Tomboy.

CHICAGO STAGE REVIEW (CSR): Thank you for taking the time to talk with Chicago Stage Review, Kelsie. Let's begin right at the beginning. What first drew you into comedy?

KELSIE HUFF (KH): This is kind of a downer answer, but I think growing up in a home with a crazy alcoholic first drew me to comedy. I had to make with the jokes to ease the constant tension. Humor starts as a coping mechanism and then it becomes a part of your personality and then you find that you're the "funny friend" and then you try to use it to get free drinks at open mics. Oh the circle of comedy!

CSR: Do you think most comedians first took on the mantle of being funny as a coping mechanism?



"I thought slut meant hilarious until like forth grade"

BCJ Photograph



"Humor starts as a coping mechanism and then it becomes a part of your personality and then you find that you're the "funny friend" and then you try to use it to get free drinks at open mics. Oh the circle of comedy!"

BCJ Photography

KH: I think every comedian's background is different so I don't want to make a general statement...but here's my general statement! Being a human is weird and painful and I think great comedians talk into an amplified stick about those weird and painful things. I think that uncomfortableness builds the tension needed to create laughter. When the tension is personal and true, all the better. Sure, boob and fart jokes are funny, but, if you go deeper, that's the stuff that sticks.

CSR: Who were some of the early influences on your comedy?

KH: When I was a little kid I would watch Eddie Murphy's Delirious over and over again. I remember trying to recreate the act during recess and another girl on the playground told me I talked like a slut because I was using curse words. I thought slut meant hilarious until like fourth grade. When I moved to the city in 1998, the Neo-Futurists blew my mind, they influenced my solo stuff a ton — as did Stephanie Shaw from my days at Columbia College. Stephanie Shaw once told me (in response to a humorous piece of

mine about body hair) that I was going to have to get past the hairy and into the scary if I wanted to really create something great. I dig that. The ladies from the now-defunct group *The Muffin Basket Cases* helped push me to perform and write at a level I didn't know I could.

CSR: What was it like the first time you performed onstage as a comedian?

KH: Crappy! I went to an open mic (in 1998, when I first moved here) with some friends from college, and one of the guys stole my set as a joke. A-hole. I was 18 and already intimidated by the entire comedy world, so I did and said nothing. He thought it was hilarious. I thought he was a dick! I didn't do stand-up because of that for years. Side note, that guy moved back home and sells meth — so I win.

CSR: Comedy still seems largely to be a boys' club. Why do you think this disparity continues?

KH: I never know how to answer this question because if I claim that the Chicago comedy scene is a boy's club, that would not be 100% true. (cont.) KH: There are tons of uber-talented women performing and producing successfully all over this town. But to deny the unique struggles of a female comedian is also false. Comedy is hard. You do it because if you don't, you feel a hole taking over your chest. You do it because there is an indescribable need to make a room full of strangers connect with something you took from your brain to a pen to a microphone. That need doesn't care if you have boobs or not. Personally, I had to find my material and confidence in all-female shows before I went out into the broader world of comedy. That is not everyone's experience, but I would not be anywhere without showcases like *Beast Women* or *the kates*.

CSR: Regular readers of **Chicago Stage Review** should already be familiar with Beast Women. Would you tell us more about **the kates**?

KH: But of course! the kates is an all-female comedy showcase. It really just started as a workshop with a few friends, and the response from the community was crazy! I originally created the kates because a few friends of mine wanted to work on different forms of comedy in a non-bar environment and I thought, we can do that! the kates is named after our first home in Edgewater, the now-closed Kate the Great's Book Emporium. We bounced around to a few coffeehouses and bookstores and finally fell in love with The Book Cellar in Lincoln Square. the kates features a different lady lineup each week and ranges from stand-ups, to readers, to monologists, to clowns, to musical acts, to finger puppeteers. It's a great environment to try out new material for new and veteran comics. There are so many female performers that I am going to need to add another day or an additional venue pretty soon. Oddly enough, I don't think I have ever booked a performer with the name Kate.

CSR: You regularly perform with **Stardust Showcase** as well. Would you tell us more about that show?

KH: The Stardust Showcase is a monthly standup show at the Underground Lounge in Wrigleyville. I coproduce the Stardust Showcase with Kristin Clifford and Alexandra Tsarpalas. The Underground Lounge is a music venue run by Dave, a super cool cat who has expanded into comedy. There are bunches of open mics, showcases, burlesque and improv shows there now. Dave rocks; the space is haunted and awesome!

CSR: The biggest morsel on your already full plate right now has to be your latest one-person show, **BRUISER: Tales from a Traumatized Tomboy**, which is about to open in Chicago, after performances in Boulder, CO, and Richmond, IL. Those are pretty farflung locations for the BRUISER World Tour. Would you explain the significance of performing the show in those locations?

KH: Well, they were the only ones who wanted to pay me! Also, Richmond, IL is where I grew up. Tim Mosbach (TUG, a McHenry County theatre company that focuses on scripts from local writers) reached out to me a few years ago to perform my first solo show HUFFS at Memorial Hall in Richmond. The piece was about taking a leap forward by going back home; what better way to do that than performing on the Memorial Hall stage? There was so much history to the location and HUFFS was so personal that it was perfect. It was really an amazing experience and terrifying, because you are talking about your family and the community and they are staring right back at you. The run sold some tickets, so TUG invited me back to preview BRUISER before I took it to Boulder. Why Boulder? Emily Harrison (square product theatre) worked with me when she lived in Chicago.

(cont.)

"I will do shows anywhere... if they pay me...or at least give me doughnuts. I'll take doughnut payments."





photo: Linda Poehlein



"I went to an open mic...with some friends from college, and one of the guys stole my set as a joke. A-hole. I was 18 and already intimidated by the entire comedy world, so I did and said nothing. He thought it was hilarious. I thought he was a dick! I didn't do standup because of that for years. Side note, that guy moved back home and sells meth - so I win."

. Hunter Matthews



She invited me to the Boulder Fringe Festival again for KH: Great opening sets by a few of my favorite local HUFFS. HUFFS went well so she asked me back for BRUISER, which went so well that she wanted to produce it for me in Chicago! But again, I'll take my shows anywhere...if they pay me...or at least give me donuts. I'll take donut payments.

CSR: If you had to ascribe a genre to **BRUISER**, what would it be... stand-up, monologue, confessional poetry, performance art?

KH: My goal has always been to merge solo performance/monologue with stand-up, and I just don't know what the heck to call that! Solo-up? I don't do weird enough shit to call it performance art. It's considered too wordy for stand-up. This show isn't "dark" enough to be thought of as typical solo performance and I don't have a red nose or do any thing with masks so I'm not a clown...how about the HuffandStuff genre, 'cause that's how large my ego is!

CSR: What can people expect when they come to see **BRUISER**?

comedians - Amy Sumpter, Carrie Bain, Jamie Jirak, Kristin Clifford, and Ever Mainard. I hope people have a good time! It's a fun show filled with wonderfully flawed characters and revelations of tiny pains and hypocrisies. I hope it speaks to the outcast in all of us and how those moments of shared humility bring us all together. Plus, I sing and give out free candy — so there's that.

CSR: Best wishes for **BRUISER**'s Chicago premiere. Who makes you laugh?

KH: Man, so many! I love how Eddie Izzard's mind works. I love the pointed-finger rage of Louis Black. I love the sweet defeat of Louis CK, and the confused joy of Maria Bamford. I heart Patton Oswalt's use of language. And, I love anything Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant (and Karl Pilkington) create. Chicago comedians I love to watch: Jamie Campbell, Amy Sumpter, Ken Bernard, Beth Stelling, Aaron Weaver, Jeannie Doogan, and all the ladies of the kates!