

Colorful language

The Curious Comedy Theater's Minority Retort is drawing a diverse new audience to laugh—and learn

BY SARAH HANSELL
STAFF WRITER

It was nearing 9:30 p.m. on a Friday and Jeremy Eli's brainchild, monthly comedy show *Minority Retort*, was about to debut at Curious Comedy Theater on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. Eli and co-founder Jason Lamb were afraid to steal a glance from backstage and find a sea of empty seats.

Or a sea of exclusively white faces.

Minority Retort is a platform for comedians of color, and Eli wanted the show to reach further than the typical majority white, older audience he was accustomed to at comedy shows.

"We were super tense, are we going to get a turnout at all?" Eli said.

And they did.

"We immediately found out, yeah," Eli said. "And then it's like, is it going to be the diverse audience we want? And Jason and I peeked our heads out from the green room and there was a 65-year-old black dude with white hair wearing a cap. And it was just, yeah, that's exactly who we want. We want this Bagger Vance character. We want old black people to want to be involved. That it didn't just reach comedy fans or young people. It reached super hip old black dudes."

And since that success, *Minority Retort's* lineups and audiences have continued to represent the diversity that Portland is so famous for lacking. The show is filling the seats with more people of color and more people who may never have seen live comedy before.

"We want people who don't necessarily already go to comedy shows, who don't maybe think that it's for them, to know that this is something we can share," Eli said. "And it was the most diverse audience I've performed for. It's for people who relate to what we're saying and people who want to know more to come out and see what's going on."

Eli, a transplant from upstate New York, moved to Portland two years ago and immediately began thinking about the seed that would grow into *Minority Retort*. He partnered with Jason Lamb, co-host of the *Karl Show!* on the Funemployment Radio Network, and brought the show to life at Curious.

Stacey Hallal, founder of Curious, had been looking to showcase people of color at the theater, which already had events and shows to showcase women and queer folks.

"I think it's important, so important, for everyone to hear each other, to have a conversation, have a discussion, to understand each other's differences and also our commonalities," Hallal said.

Hallal started Curious Comedy Theater in 2008, a nonprofit with the mission to "improve the lives of kids, adults, and seniors through the art of comedy." The theater has specific outreach programs for kids in school and for seniors living in retirement homes. She believes in diversifying both the lineups and the audiences of her shows, and was excited by the opportunity *Minority Retort* presented.

"When you just have one black person in a lineup they become 'the black person,' but when you have many people of color you hear all the voices," Hallal said. "When you're not the only one in the lineup, you don't have the pressure of representing your community."

And with such a diverse lineup as last month's show, which featured black performers, but also Latino, Native American and queer performers, comedians are freer from that pressure. The performers got big laughs from the audience with jokes about gentrifying vegetables in the grocery store, Caucasian spirituals, hip hop, and interracial relationships, just to name a few.

"I think we're seeing comedians of color share their perspectives on race but also just speak independently as themselves and

talk about their experience," Eli said. "It doesn't have to be hinged on that. I think it's just really important that people are allowed to express themselves as individuals, that your comedy could come from that and not just relying on what you would think a

black person would be or something like that."

But despite this success, there still are many challenges. For example, Eli said that he's had trouble finding women of color to participate in *Minority Retort*.

"Part of it is, comedy is kind of gross," said Bri Pruett, Portland comedian and headliner of *Minority Retort's* March show. "There are a lot of white dudes doing comedy, and their perspective is overwhelming at times, and it's also oppressive and widely unchallenged. And when it is challenged, here are people whose job it is to stand on stage and talk, so they're very comfortable retorting. They're very comfortable being like, you can't tell me this is racist, you can't tell me what to say."

And Portland is well-known for its overwhelming whiteness. Most of the audiences Eli had performed for in Portland were mainly white and often older, people who couldn't relate to the experiences Eli was talking about.

"The show comes from a frustration I had performing for liberal white audiences that would more respond to buzzwords and be

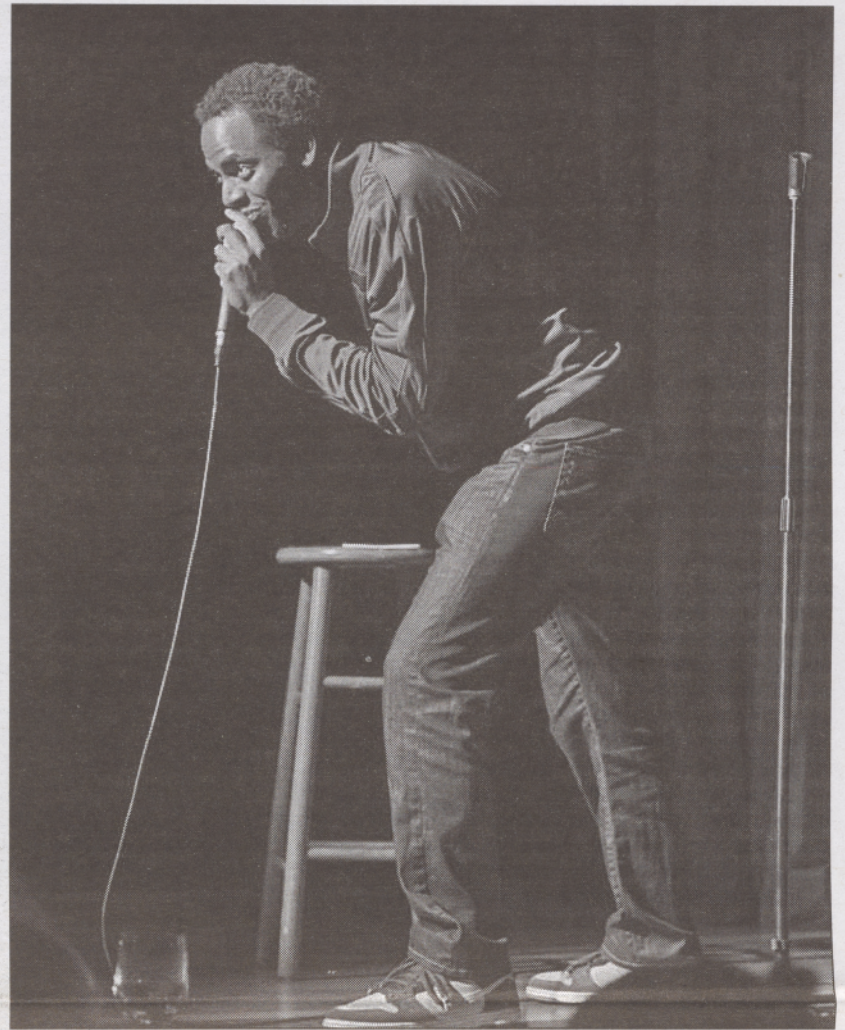


PHOTO COURTESY OF CURIOUS COMEDY THEATER

Baron Vaughn performing in *Minority Retort*, a comedy show featuring a cast of minority stand-ups now playing at the Curious Comedy Theater.

turned off by certain, just, words," Eli said. "It's hard to make people laugh if they think that they're being called an oppressor or something."

Pruett, a part-Asian woman who often passes for white, has felt the frustration of coming up against people who are uncomfortable broaching the subject of race at all.

"I think that people don't know how to talk about race in Portland, so if a conversation comes up, it's conflict, and people in Portland are uncomfortable with conflict," Pruett said. "It's very kumbayah."

Many of the people of color who grew up in Portland have been gentrified out of their neighborhoods, making it even easier for white Portlanders to ignore race altogether.

"I feel like there are a couple of types of people in color in Portland," Pruett said. "There are people that are from here and have been gentrified out of the neighborhoods, that have been traditionally people of color, and then there are people who have just moved here. So the folks of color who have just moved here, they don't have a feeling like, I resent this community, because they haven't been pushed out of it. And the folks who have been pushed out of it, they sort of do their own thing a lot of the time."

For Eli, *Minority Retort* is about more than a comedy show, more than visibility for the black community in Portland, even more than creating meaningful conversations about race. It's also making black voices heard in a climate when black life is

devalued.

"Honestly, we always want representation, we always want that community thing, but so much of it toward the end of 2014 was all of the police brutality cases," he said. "Honestly, when we were hungriest to get this started, it was so much more about, let's have our presence known before we get killed, before we get pushed to the side. People don't take our issues seriously — life and death, seriously. We need to make this happen immediately."

"Yes, (*Minority Retort* is) nice for the community, and, yeah, it's good for me as a comedian to have this, but it just became more than the value of entertainment," Eli said. "We should do what we can while we can and let people know what's important to us. Yeah, we want to relate to black and brown people, but it's a good opportunity for white people to listen — just listen."

Just as Curious Comedy Theater is trying to diversify its audience through *Minority Retort* and welcome people of color in a neighborhood where black people have been pushed out, Eli hopes the show itself will encourage conversations and more comfort around race in Portland.

"That's what Portlanders need to learn. It's personal responsibility — for gentrification, for racism, for micro-aggressions — and just how to have conversations and not be Portland polite, to just talk like humans," Pruett said. "I'm really excited that this is happening to this city and people are starting to have these conversations."

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— JEREMY ELI
CURIOUS COMEDY THEATER