

Yuk Yuk's cabaret is funny business

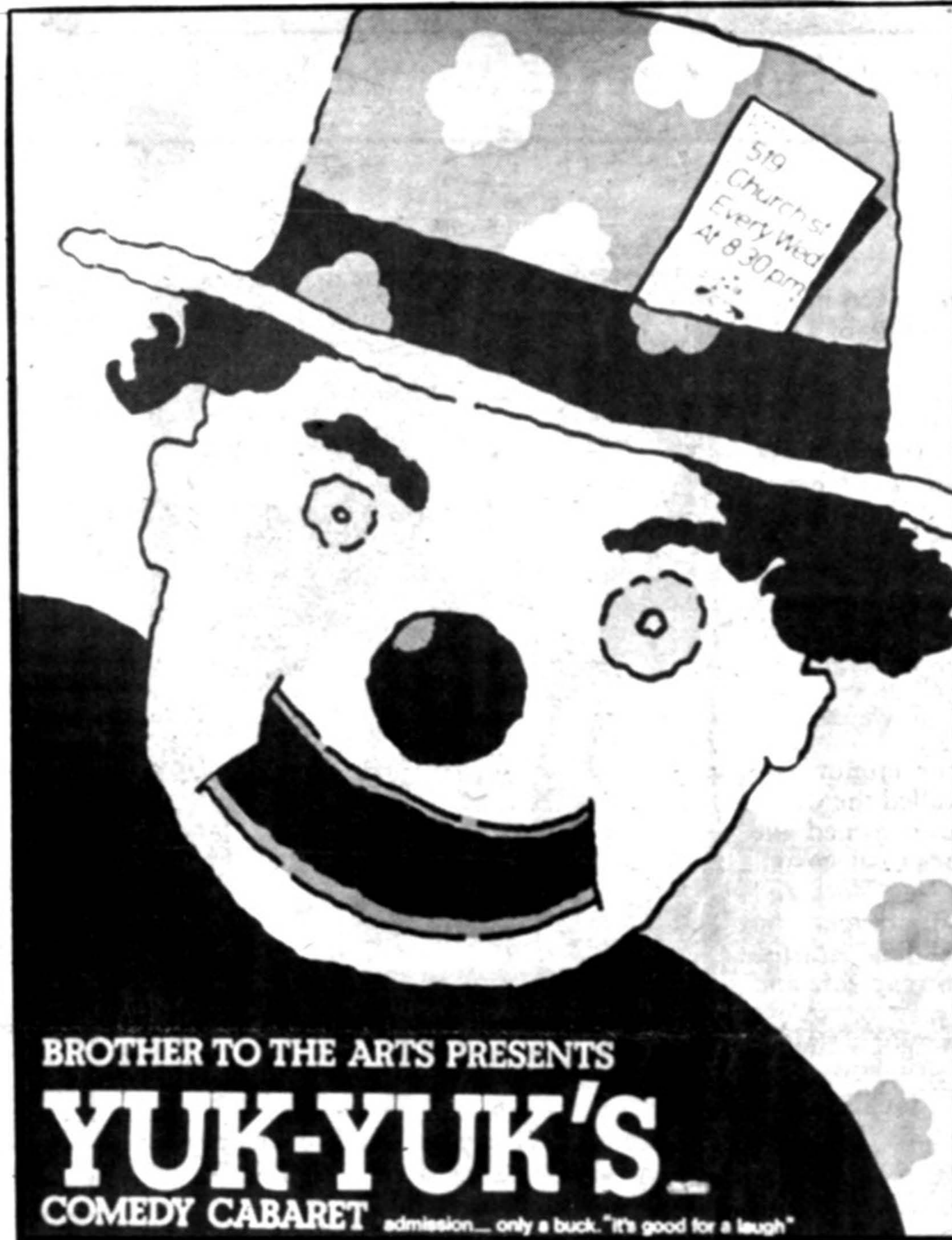
By BRYAN DEMCHINSKY

Yuk Yuk's (it sounds like a Chinese restaurant) is a comedy cabaret featuring funny business of all sorts and mostly stand-up comedians who want to practise their routines before a live audience.

Despite dingy surroundings (the basement of the Church Street Community Centre which might best be described as having early cave decor) and its peculiar name, this new club is packing in sizeable crowds for a type of entertainment not well known in Canada.

The idea of a comedy club isn't new. There are a number of similar establishments in the United States, notably the two Comedy Stores in Los Angeles. A certain mystique has grown up around the comedy cabaret. The graduates of the gruelling apprenticeship which these clubs provide frequently turn up on the talk shows wistfully recalling the starving days when they performed for nothing, sometimes working as waiters between their sets.

Yuk Yuk's is the first club of its kind in Canada. It is pervaded with a "something's happening here" atmosphere which is rather unique these days. Manager Mark Breslin explains that, "the comedy scene in Toronto is comparable to the folk scene here in the late sixties." What happens at Yuk Yuk's is new, often innovative, and the audience never knows quite what to expect.



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Breslin, who refers to himself as the club's "minister of praxis" and co-manager Joel Axler were the directors of last year's Ryerson Riot production. Their working philosophy is "even entertainment should be controversial," a belief many people felt was borne out of Riot 76. Breslin was also musical director of the now defunct Harborfront Theatre.

Anybody can perform at Yuk Yuk's. "The idea of the club is to allow comics to work out in front of live audience. Comedy more than any other art form depends on an audience," says Breslin.

He compares the comedian doing his act to an athlete working out in a gym. It's an interesting analogy because watching the performances at Yuk Yuk's is like an exercise in the anatomy of a comic routine.

In the stark but intimate surroundings of the small club every flaw and idiosyncrasy of the comic's act, and a large part of his personality are exposed to the critical eyes of the audience. There are no average comedians. Either the jokes work and people laugh, or the poor fellow is left with that excruciating, embarrassing silence.

It becomes apparent how important timing and feeling comfortable with an audience are to the comic. If he doesn't get it just right, people will refuse to laugh, even when the jokes are funny.

people stood out.

Larry Horowitz, a local comic appeared to have mastered the art of timing his material. The material was fresh, his observations acute, and he appeared at ease with his audience.

As a result, people liked what they heard and laughed. A regular patron of Yuk Yuk's sitting next to me noted that Horowitz has been getting progressively better and more confident with each appearance he makes.

Marcel Strigberger, a young comedian from Montreal making his first appearance at Yuk Yuk's was a pleasant surprise. His acerbic commentary on the peculiarities of Waspy Toronto as seen through the eyes of a Quebecois hit home.

Along with the aspiring hopefuls there is a feature act, the only one Yuk Yuk's can afford to pay. These are usually professional acts which have gained a measure of reputation.

Dr. Bandoli's Travelling Medicine Show was the feature act. Unfortunately the Woodstock based troupe has a name very similar to the recently defunct CBC radio program, Dr. Bundolo's Pandemonium Medicine Show. A lot of people, including myself, thought they were one and the same group.

But unlike the political satire of the Vancouver radio show, Dr. Bandoli's act is a weird combination of Commedia del Arte and Monty Pythonesque humor.