

Family-safe humor

Sister Cantaloupe, the First Lady of Gospel Comedy, will come to Union Baptist Church

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Who says comedy can't be clean and funny? Not Sister Cantaloupe. As one of the few clean-humored family-oriented comedians, this nationally-acclaimed performer will entertain audiences of all ages on Aug. 2 at 8 p.m. at Union Baptist Church.

The service is open to the public and admission is free. However, donations of canned foods and nonperishable items to the Union Urban Ministries Food Bank are appreciated.

Trina Jeffrie portrays the wisecracking Christian character Sister Cantaloupe, preaching the gospel of laughter with her style of religious humor. Audiences love Sister Cantaloupe's humorous insights on subjects anyone can relate to such as certain relatives. For example, Sister Cantaloupe says her cousin Cucumber's "mind is bad. She was reading the Bible the other day and proclaimed that God has a car. I told her God doesn't have a car, and she said it's right there in Genesis 3:24: 'God drove Adam and Eve out of the garden.'"

Sister Cantaloupe is filling



Trina Jeffrie is well-known as Sister Cantaloupe.

a vacuum for audiences who feel worlds apart from today's bawdy comedy.

"My humor is clean; it's that ain't-that-the-truth kind of humor we all love. My comedy is affecting kids, adults and preachers of all faiths," Jeffrie said.

Jeffrie believes through

humor she can touch the world and remembers when a down-cast woman told her that she listened to Sister Cantaloupe's jokes all day long until she laughed herself silly and the depression lifted. "Proof," Jeffrie said, "that my style of religious and clean humor serves up heaping doses of healing between the punch lines."

Sister Cantaloupe, Jeffrie explained, has a simple message: "Through faith in God, we can get over any challenge." Her own faith, Jeffrie said, has sustained her throughout the hardest times in her life. As a child, Jeffrie didn't see much of her mother.

"My birth mother suffered from mental illness, spent most of her adult life in a psychiatric institution and died when I was around 19," Jeffrie recalled. Her father remarried and left her to be raised by a series of relatives.

"Laughter does lighten the soul. I'm using religious humor for the purpose of drawing attention to God, His ways and our ways of coping with His ways," Jeffrie said.

Jeffrie has performed on "The Jenny Jones Show" and

Tiny Guests



The Chronicle staff got a lot bigger for about a half-hour recently as children from Baldwin's Chapel Seventh-Day Adventist Church Day Camp in High Point came to the newspaper for a tour. The kids got to see how pages are designed and visited The Chronicle's production department and newsroom. Above, they pose in front of a mural on The Chronicle's Liberty Street building.

on the "Bobby Jones Gospel Hour," which airs on BET. She's appeared on Fox News, ABC News and "BET Tonight with Tavis Smiley." The Washington Post, Detroit Free Press, The Dallas Morning News, The Charlotte Observer, Gannett News Service, Gospel Today and Emerge

magazines have written feature stories on her. Jeffrie has toured in London, Germany and Japan and with recording artists Kirk Franklin, Vickie Winans, Vanessa Bell Armstrong and Stephanie Mills. She has also released CDs and videos.

First Friday is an alternative praise and worship service. For more information, call (336) 724-9305 or visit the Web site at www.union-baptistwsnc.org. Union Baptist Church is at 1200 North Trade Street. Dr. Sir Walter Mack Jr. is pastor and teacher.



Les Epstein instructs the groups of actors Friday, hours before curtain time.



John Tener and Deb Colvin-Tener join the youngsters in a laugh during a break in rehearsal last week. The couple created Shakespeare in a Box several years ago.

Play

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the Columbus, Ohio-based company Shakespeare in a Box. The company features husband and wife team John Tener and Deb Colvin-Tener, who regularly perform abridged versions of Shakespearean plays using their acting ability and the contents of a box (hats, mustaches, set screens).

For the last two summers, they have been sharing their expertise with Winston-Salem youngsters at the theater's summer camp. The Teners had less than 13 days to take a group of hyperactive kids and turn them into thespians worthy of performing Shakespeare. They say the experience was well worth it and successful.

"We found that the kids were naturals. They really pulled it together very quickly," Tener said. "It is really an empowering experience for the kids. It gives them an opportunity to be Shakespearean actors, and parents appreciate it because their kids are working with something that teaches them not only about the language but about poetry and grammar."

Colvin-Tener, a graduate of N.C. School of the Arts, did not give the kids a chance to be put off or scared away by performing something as weighty as Shakespeare. To lighten the atmosphere, she taught the young actors Elizabethan songs and dances; she also gave the kids a chance to create their own Shakespearean masks.

"I hope that they take away from this that Shakespeare is not scary," Colvin-Tener said. "The parents are the ones that sort of shut down when you mention Shakespeare. The kids love it, and hopefully if you get the kids to love the work, the adults will love it as well."

Ben Smith had only danced in "The Nutcracker" before landing the role of Romeo for the summer camp production (the kids auditioned for the various roles). Smith said he came to the camp not really a die-hard fan of acting, but he admits the craft grew on him quickly. He even did a little research and soul-searching in order to play his character realistically.

"When I am with Juliet (played by Olivia Teague), it is kind of hard because I don't know how to act because I never experienced love before," said the 11-year-old. "In order to do the role, I watched some movies and talked with my directors, John and Deb."

Corretta Hickman also had to dig deep to play one of her characters (the character is a male).

"I just make my voice deep," she said, demonstrating her manly tone. "and cover my hair with a hat."

Like many of her peers in the drama, Hickman hopes the play was not her last time under the spotlight.

"I want to be a famous actress," she said.

Since the girls in the camp outnumbered the boys, Vienna Russillo had to play two male characters. When asked whether she was bothered by switching genders for the sake of art, the 9-year-old said it was all part of show biz.

"I don't mind it at all. I play men very well," she said confidently.

While crafting and perfecting the play were the primary focuses of the two-week camp, the young actors admitted that there were also lots of times to have fun away from the auditori-

um. Davaun Hickman, 12, did not know any of his co-stars before the camp started. But after just a couple weeks, he said many in the group are inseparable.

"We have had a lot of fun being together, even away from the stage," he said, flanked by several of his "new best friends." "One time we pretended that there was a ghost in the girls bathroom."

Epstein said the goal of the camp is not necessarily to breed actors. Although many graduates of the theater will go on to acting in other productions and to arts schools, the skills learned in the camp can be used by the participants in any career they pursue, Epstein said.

"You learn key skills like public speaking, projecting your voice and how to have a presence," he said.

The young actors impressed an audience filled with their parents and peers Friday as they put on the production at Mineral Springs Middle School. Epstein said that the theater will continue to hold summer camps and continue to mesh local young talent with the timeless work of Shakespeare. Children's Theater actors are scheduled to perform two works by Shakespeare during the upcoming season.

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