

MINNPOST

Lizz Winstead takes aim with 'Shoot the Messenger'

By **Jim Walsh** | 02/05/08

NEW YORK — Lizz Winstead, taking a drag on her cigarette, wants a slogan. "We can't do anything until we have a slogan," she says to no one in particular but to everyone in the room.

Winstead, co-creator of Comedy Central's "The Daily Show," is perched on the window sill of her apartment that sits four floors above ever-bustling Broadway in New York City.

You need a key to get in, and if it seems as if most of Winstead's friends and colleagues have one, that's because it's true. So if you spend any amount of time in the house of Lizz — as I did in December (because I'm a longtime friend from her Minnesota days) — you will be given a key, some towels, some food, a crash spot on the couch, and then you will be left alone to do your own thing. And, in the process, you might observe something like a mini-media comedy revolution in the making.



Photo courtesy of "Shoot the Messenger"
Lizz Winstead, Minneapolis native



"We need a slogan," she repeats, as some of her comrades sit around the dining room table, looking not at each other but at their individual laptops. Seated at the table are Hank Gallo and Shannon Manning and a few other members of the all-volunteer writers group whose weekly "Shoot the Messenger" live show and podcast has become something of a sensation in New York's competitive live arts scene. No doubt they'll have something to say about Stupor Tuesday, um, Super Tuesday, [here](#).

Sanity in a sea of insanity

That much is especially the case these days, as celebs such as Douglas Coupland, Michael Stipe and Liv Tyler have recently stopped in at the "Shoot" troupe's Monday-night cabaret space to get a dose of sanity in a political and media climate gone insane.

Think it hasn't? Then you wouldn't get the "Shoot" premise, as spelled out on its website, which welcomes viewers to "Wake Up World, America's only six-hour morning show! Half the content, twice the time." Furthermore, you are probably not bugged in any way by such things as Twin Cities meteorologists telling holiday viewers that "we're in for some good shopping weather."

"Shopping weather?" says Winstead later, after all the other guests have cleared out for the night. "It's sort of like, 'OK, here comes some good mindless-doing-nothing-having-your-soul-sucked-out-with-stuff weather.'

"When did we stop becoming inquisitive and appalled by stuff? I harken back to this piece we did for our Halloween show, 'Waterboarding for Apples.' We've been having a discussion in this country for three years about the fact that we are torturing people and we're using techniques that simulate drowning, and we're supposed to be this civilized, evolved nation, and no one questions it at all when it's a news story, and the next story is (about) shopping?

"I just don't know why people don't stop what they're doing and say, 'Um, wait. I live in a country that tortures people?' Instead it's, 'Oh, I live in a country where I can get 70 percent off at the store.' I don't understand it. I really don't understand it."

Commiseration and comedy

Lucky for Winstead, she has found some kindred-spirits-in-outrage. Back in her commune-cum-apartment, the People With Keys keep coming: Here is Berit Ulseth, the 20-year-old jazz chanteuse from Minneapolis, who provides musical interludes at the show and daily walks for Winstead's dogs Edie and Buddy. Here comes Darbi Worley, who plays Wake Up World's Emily Rackcheck, the epitome of every fake-boobed-hired-for-their-looks bimbo who ever stumbled over a teleprompter. Here comes Baron Vaughn, who plays Davis Miles, the patented token black of the news team and innocuous co-host to Winstead's equally innocuous Hope Jean Paul, who makes [name of your most vilified morning TV show hostess here] look like Christiane Amanpour.

All of which is to say it's smart stuff —and Winstead admits she's starting to get restless with the cabaret- and Internet-only audience, at the same time some of the mainstream cable outlets are showing interest. As of now, there are no firm offers. Which isn't the point, anyway.

"I just think that any place you can have funny commentary that gets people to think, and more importantly gets people to maybe react and act out and want to be part of something, it's a good thing," she says. "And it's really great to do it in this tiny cabaret in the Village, but I want to have more people see it."



Photo courtesy of "Shoot the Messenger"

Baron Vaughn plays co-host Davis Miles to Winstead's Hope Jean Paul.

"I've never been in a rush to get something right, and I think it can be a really big problem with why so many things don't become great – because people latch onto them before they're ready. That's why we haven't done a full-court, 'Come see us and review us.' We're trying to be a little bit under the radar until we have it up to a place where we think people should make a

judgment about what it is."

Long hours for labor of love

Winstead, a South Minneapolis native who got her start in the comedy clubs of Minneapolis, has an impressive resume: co-creator of Comedy Central's "The Daily Show" (which she left in 1997) and one of the founders and first on-air hosts at Air America. She has been part of many teams, but this one spends ungodly amounts of time together, with the main pay-off being a weekly dinner in her apartment. They make up what Winstead calls "an all-volunteer army"; i.e., everybody works day jobs and the production costs of "Shoot" are financed solely by the weekly cover charge and donations.

"Because of the grassroots nature of it, this sometimes feels like more of a team than other things I've been involved with," she says. "The difference is these people are doing this because they love the project. The reward is the project. It's not a job. Here I have a bunch of people who I'm feeding, and letting them have their ideas get out in the world, and it feels like they love the project and they're doing it for all the right reasons."

As the quiet chaos of the comings and goings and People With Keys continues throughout the evening

into the night, the writers work. It is equal-parts newsroom budget meeting and Saturday Night Live bull session – demanding, funny, intense. At the moment, the crew is still searching for a slogan that will sum up a holiday special that attempts to persuade all religions to embrace materialism the way Christians have with Christmas. Slogans are tossed out. Some are met with indifference, silence, polite chuckles. Then, out of nowhere, Manning says, "Consume All Ye Faithful."

Ding-ding-ding. We have a winner. But there are no high-fives, no exaggerated back-pats, just a natural move to the next order of business: There's more work to be done, as show time is two days away.

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