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## ENTERTAINMENT

A full cup of comedy: Triple Espresso makes its Philadelphia-area debut this week



By Jack Firreno

Just over 20 years ago, Bob Stromberg took on a challenge — two, actually — that changed his career forever.

“One of our friends was in a show and my wife said to me, ‘You could write a better show than that,’ ” he recalled

So Stromberg, a comic at the time, took on the challenge along with his friend Michael Pearce Donley, who was in that production, and their colleague Bill Arnold.

To make things more interesting, they booked a space to perform before they had even started writing.

“I told them what my wife had said, and Bill said, ‘Why don’t we book it?’ ” Stromberg recalled. “Then I got a call from him a couple days later saying, ‘I booked it!’ Thirty days away, and we hadn’t written a thing.”

So the trio worked feverishly on what became the first version of *Triple Espresso*. A modern-day vaudeville show of sorts, it follows three performers — a musician, magician and jack-of-all-trades — whose shot at fame culminates in a catastrophic national television appearance.

The characters and talents are based on the writer's own skills, and the first stretch of shows relied on the actors' own natural chemistry.

But if the fictional story is billed as a "rags-to-rags story," the real thing has been anything but.

"It took off like wildfire. We couldn't believe it," said Stromberg. "Which is funny now, because it's not nearly as good as it is now."

First launched at a family night in a church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, it quickly got picked up at the local Cricket Theater as the trio expanded the show from 40 minutes to a full two-act production.

After that, it played seven days a week for 13 years. Toward the end of the run, the creators had to get a second cast up and running while the original players took the show to San Diego, California, where it played for another 11 years.

Since then, *Triple Espresso* has become a mainstay in cities across the country and beyond. The count is around 60 places in the states, and another 10 or so abroad.

This month, it's coming to the Bucks County Playhouse for a 10-show run, one of the first on the East Coast.

To Stromberg, the reason behind the show's success is packing in as many laughs for as many people as possible.

"It's about as much as you can laugh in two hours," he explained. "It's not a kiddie show, but there's nothing inappropriate. Kids laugh, you can bring Grandmas and Grandpas — there's a wide market of people who want to come.

"There are people who have seen it 25 times. It's just very, very funny."

The jokes translate far beyond the original cast, too. Stromberg says the original troupe hires only "really good people who can find the funny." Those who make it do so over and over again.

He recalls filling in for his counterpart, John Bush, in Des Moines, Iowa. The show ran for 17 months straight there, and the actors there became local media sensations, even opening parades and appearing on television.

"When folks would leave, they'd say, 'I enjoyed it very much, but when is John Bush coming back?' " laughed Stromberg.

Back home, Stromberg, Arnold and Donley still perform, and tweak the show, today.

"It's defined all three of our careers. We just finished a holiday run in Minneapolis, and my wife brought my kids and grandkids. It's remarkable to think we wrote this show when I was 42 years old and now I'm 64," he said.

"We've all been successful on our own as well, but we can't deny it's what's kept us the busiest and has been the most gratifying."

*Triple Espresso* plays at the Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St. in New Hope, from Jan. 26 through Feb. 6. For tickets or information, call 215.862.2121 or visit **[bcptheater.org](http://bcptheater.org)**.