Written by Mike Schulz
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Like most professional performers, Chicagoan Nick Semar has a healthy number of musicals on his résumé.

Unlike most professional performers, Semar can boast acting credits in 26 original, hour-long musicals.

Staged over 27 nights.

All of which were made up on the spot.

“We were in Scotland in August for the Edinburgh Fringe festival,” says Semar, a 14-month veteran with the improvisational comedians of Baby Wants Candy, performing at Augustana College’s Centennial Hall on October 1. “We did a bunch of shows there, and some of the titles were very mundane. Like, one of the titles was just *Two Dragons & a Prince*. And one of them was *Amish Girls Gone Wild* .

“But then some of them were very specific,” he continues. “One of them was *Dinosaurs Vs. Zombies: Apocalypse – A Love Story, Perhaps* . And another time, one of our titles was *Lady Gaga Goes to Hogwarts* , where we combined Lady Gaga and Harry Potter stuff into one world.

“We never know what’s going to happen in a Baby [Wants Candy] show,” says Semar. “All we know is that we’re going to do a musical, and it’s going to be based on a suggestion from the audience. Those are the only things we know for *sure*.” He laughs. “And hopefully it’s going to be funny.”

Chances are excellent that it will be, at least if the rave reviews are to be trusted. With the *Chicago Sun-Times* describing Baby Wants Candy as “Chicago’s most consistently funny and crowd-pleasing show” and *Time Out Chicago* calling it “one of those shows all audiences aspire to see more than once,” this unique musical-improv experience has been a much-loved Windy City entertainment since its debut in 1995. (Baby Wants Candy performs every Friday night at 10:30 p.m. at Chicago’s Apollo Theater.)

Currently, there are also branches of the show in New York and Los Angeles, with veteran participants including *30 Rock*’s Jack McBrayer and *Saturday Night Live*’s Seth Meyers and Rachel Dratch. And between the weekly, big-city engagements and frequent touring destinations, Baby Wants Candy has proved popular nationally and internationally – and, for some audiences, popular many times over.

“We have a lot of people who come back because our show’s different every time,” says the 28-year-old Semar. “There are two guys in Chicago who come, and I don’t know that I’ve *ever* played a show that one or both of them haven’t been at. It’s their regular thing.”

The setup to Baby Wants Candy, as Semar describes it, is simple ... which doesn’t necessarily mean that its performance is easy.

“What happens,” he says, “is that we go to the audience at the top of the show, and we get a suggestion for a title to a musical that doesn’t exist. We’re not looking for people to shout out *Guys & Dolls* or *Cats* or anything like that; we won’t take something that’s an *actual* musical. But we’re generally looking for something that’s just absurd, and we give a couple examples of titles that we’ve had before.

“Some of them are just basic,” Semar continues. “Like *The Kitten’s Diary*. Or *Seeing-Eye Ponies* . And we’ve had a lot of celebrity titles and pop-culture titles. When we were in the U.K., *Bush Seduces the Queen* was one of them.

“So we ask for a title, and the first thing we hear someone shout, that’s what we go with. And that’s all we get. The lights go down, the lights come up, and we are immediately in the show.”

What follows in a typical Baby Wants Candy production, says Semar, is 60 minutes of “things you’d see in a musical – characters interacting in scenes, and going from scenes into songs. There’s usually some kind of big opening number, and more often than not we end on a song. But there are no hard-and-fast rules about what we need to do in a show *ever*, and not every scene has to have a song. It’s a narrative.”

And, it should go without saying, an unpredictable one. “Everything is improvised: the songs, the characters, the music, what we call ‘dancing,’” says Semar with a laugh. “Some people think it’s a magic trick. They think we must have a plant in the audience, until they realize, ‘Oh wait, it’s my *friend* who shouted out the title.’”

Employing mime and working with whatever they happen to be wearing, Baby Wants Candy’s cast members use no props or added costume pieces in their shows. And while the number of comedians appearing in a particular production can fluctuate – Semar estimates that between 45 and 60 performers participate nationwide – Baby Wants Candy most frequently tours with five actors. Which isn’t to say that the musicals being staged ever feature only five *roles*.

“You almost never play just one character the whole time,” says Semar. “Unless you’re, like, the main protagonist or antagonist, you generally end up playing several characters. That’s one of the great things about it. There are five performers out there, but everybody gets the chance to play whatever they want, as long as it serves the title suggestion, and serves the show, and serves what’s happened in the show to that point.”

Laughing, he adds, “Though sometimes it can become kind of convoluted and complicated, if we find ourselves doing too *much*. I couldn’t count the number of times I’ve played inanimate objects or animals. But that’s part of the fun of it.”

Describing the art of long-form musical-comedy improvisation (as opposed to the short-form improv of ComedySportz and *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*) as “a different animal ... a subculture *within*
a subculture,” Semar says that knowing when it’s time to burst into song can be one of the trickier aspects to performing in Baby Wants Candy.

“Sometimes players will just start singing, and then our musical director starts playing underneath them,” he says. “But more often than not, the musical director calls it. He’s on the keyboard and is watching the show intently, and when he feels the scene has gotten to the point where it warrants a song, he starts one. Sometimes it’s a pacing thing, but most of the time it’s because the emotion of the scene has heightened to the point where it *deserves* a song.”

As the musical director launches into his (also improvised) tunes, says Semar, the cast follows suit. “In improv, there’s the idea of group mind – where everybody’s sort of feeling the same thing at the same time. And so when the musical director starts playing a bit, we’ll just know, ‘Yeah, we’re going into a song here.’ It’s sort of this thing where we’re almost reading each other’s minds. Where we’re totally in the present, but also trying to predict the future at all times.

“The whole concept behind what we’re doing when we’re together,” Semar continues, “is that we’re all on stage to support each other and help each other. If you’ve got that trust there, it helps build the show. And Baby is an organization that tends to hire really good people that you can trust on stage.

“It’s an exhilarating thing. It’s essentially like when you’re a kid and you’re playing pretend, whether it’s superheroes or little girls playing house. It’s all just pretend, and with Baby, you get to do that in a socially acceptable format as an adult again.”

Baby Wants Candy plays Augustana College's Centennial Hall on Saturday, October 1 at 8 p.m. The performance will be preceded by an opener with saxophonist Matt Corey, tickets are $8, and more information and reservations are available by calling (309)794-7306.

For more information on the Baby Wants Candy improv troupe, visit BabyWantsCandy.com .