

Aspen funny business is on

By Georg Szalai

ASPEN, Colo. — The first public performance of Jim Henson's Puppet Improv, young sketch troupe the Whitest Kids U Know and a first round of stand-up comedy showcases attracted much industry attention Wednesday night as the 12th U.S. Comedy Arts Festival kicked off.

The early stand-up shows at the annual industry fixture, organized by HBO, featured a mix of known and emerging talent, with Mitch Fatel, Brent Weinbach and Robert Kelly among the standout performers, according to industry attendees.

Veteran Fatel won over a difficult crowd with jokes about snoring girlfriends, Internet porn and other relationship riffs.

San Francisco-based Weinbach awed the audience with oddball impressions (about the thin line between "gay eyes" and "psychopathic eyes," among others) and off-the-wall jokes as well as his knack for creating characters and voices.

New York's Kelly scored with an edgy set focused mainly on his body weight ("I have accused my girlfriend of shrinking my shirts").

Also earning accolades were Lenny Marcus, who pointed with his Jewish nerd shtick; Nick Thune, who entertained the audience with his guitar and often absurdist one-liners; and Stewart Francis, who also showcased comedic curveballs and one-liners ("I was going to join a debate club, but someone talked me out of it" and "Did I already do my *deja vu* joke?")

New York's Whitest Kids had their audience slapping their knees with their videos and stage riffs on

Hollywood studios' creative process and difficult issues, such as racism, date rape and a hip-hop version of Adolf Hitler.

Meanwhile, "Puppet Improv," an adult-themed improv show performed by Henson puppeteers that had been performed only before an industry audience in Los Angeles, played to a packed room that enjoyed the range of sketches, puppets and voices on display.

As host, Groundlings alum Patrick Bristow asked the audience for suggestions on settings of sketches, relationships between characters and other things, leaving the puppeteers to create stories and jokes on the fly.

Among the audience favorites was a skit in which a weasel gave a lecture on vasectomies in Romanian with an armadillo translating into English.

Charlie Todd and Annabelle Gurwitch created buzz Thursday in daytime events.

Todd, founder of prank collective ImprovEverywhere.com, showed video examples of his recent prank work, with industry observers seeing opportunities for TV projects in his work.

Gurwitch has her comedic documentary and stage show "Fired!" along with her just-published book "Fired! Tales of the Canned, Canceled, Downsized & Dismissed" at USCAF. She started the book when Woody Allen fired her from a stage production three years ago.

While she calls the book "mainly humor therapy," the film tries to explore the overall downsizing trend in the U.S. Gurwitch also is looking at developing a possible TV show expanding on the "Fired!" theme of helping people affected by layoffs. ■