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Comedy Kingpin

Eugene Mirman and the Eugene Mirman Comedy Festival

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

It started as a joke, but in its sixth year, the Eugene Mirman Comedy Festival has become a momentous occasion—and for more than just Eugene Mirman.

"It's the only live show I don't hesitate about doing, ever," said Kristen Schaal, a comic with credits on "The Daily Show" and "30 Rock." Joining more than 30 other acts, she performs a live variety show dubbed "Hot Tub" at this year's fest, which starts Thursday and continues through the weekend at the Bell House and Union Hall in Brooklyn.

Ms. Schaal's main motivation is the festival's namesake muse. "Eugene is like the Godfather of the alternative-comedy scene," she said. "He's sitting in his apartment, just petting his cat and really calling the shots."



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Kevin Hagen for The Wall Street Journal

Eugene Mirman holds a portrait of himself as Napoleon.

Others followed the same command. "My relationship with Eugene is comprised exclusively of us appearing on stages in Brooklyn together, usually in venues for 75 to 300 people max, occasionally sober," said the public-radio eminence Ira Glass.

As he does for "This American Life," Mr. Glass will tell stories on Thursday, though live and in the midst of members of a modern-dance troupe.

"It sounds completely awful, I know," he said.

He pointed out that his first such performance, "One Radio Host, Two Dancers," took place on stage at no less than Carnegie Hall. "Just as we killed at Carnegie Hall," he said, "we will kill at the Bell House."



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Mr. Mirman, 39 years old, started the festival in 2008 mainly as a way to convene colleagues and friends. His own star as a stand-up was rising, and, as the host of a prominent weekly comedy series, he had assumed a unique position as a Brooklyn comedy kingmaker simply by dint of being around. Then, a frivolous quip among peers about devoting a festival to himself turned from farce to reality.

"It was a joke about something I no longer recall," Mr. Mirman said. "They said, 'You should do that because it's really ridiculous.' "

Five years later, his festival has become a centerpiece of a much more robust Brooklyn comedy circuit. "Am I an impresario of Gowanus? Sure," Mr. Mirman said. "If that's a thing, then I'm fine to be it."

Wyatt Cenac, another "Daily Show" star to perform a stand-up set on Thursday, claimed he was more than happy to accept an invitation from Mr. Mirman, whom he called "a delightful cherub of comedy, like Cupid." Of the spirit they share, Mr. Cenac said, "When it hits you, it makes you laugh instead of fall in love, which is better. Laughter can never leave you at the altar or have an affair with a 'friend from the gym.' "

Jim Gaffigan, a movie and TV veteran who also wrote the book "Dad Is Fat," was both sly and sincere in his sentiments. "I like the fact that I may be in a little better shape than Eugene," he said of his friend, before praising Mr. Mirman as a festival organizer and, more important, a comedian. "Eugene is what all comedians are deep down: a comedy nerd searching for their own personal comedy authenticity. Eugene's comedy is very authentic to who he is."

In the past few years, from his home base on the border of Gowanus and Park Slope, Mr. Mirman has released numerous comedy albums (with titles like "God is a Twelve-Year-Old Boy with Asperger's"), authored a satirical self-help book ("The Will to Whatever: A Guide to Modern Life") and voiced a character on the animated TV series "Bob's Burgers," which will be the subject of a festival event on Sunday.

"There are so many avenues now," Mr. Mirman said of his spectrum of projects. "I don't know where comedy is going, but I do know there is a lot of opportunity."

Some of that is extracurricular, he added. Among the less than conventional offerings at this year's Eugene Mirman Comedy Festival will be an inflatable bouncy castle with a licensed therapist inside ("You can talk to about your problems as you bounce!") and a whole pig to be roasted as part of the festivities.

About the former, there is no need for concern, Mr. Mirman said. "We hire people who professionally roast pigs and know the rules."

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