

Changes on Horizon For Chicago-Native Conan O'Brien Writer Kevin Dorff

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CHICAGO – [Kevin Dorff](#) [11] spent his Sunday in Chicago kicking back and watching the Bears game.



Jim Zulevic and Kevin Dorff (on right) at Second City.

Photo credit: Second City

A Chicago native and Emmy Award-winning writer for “Late Night with Conan O'Brien” for seven years, the current [WGA strike](#) [12] has shut down production and provided him something of a forced vacation.

For nearly a week, he has been back in the city that started his career when he first began taking classes in the early 1990s at what was then called Improv Olympic (now [iO](#) [13]).

Within a few years, he was performing on [Second City](#) [14]'s main stage.

On Tuesday night, Dorff will be performing alongside [Horatio Sanz](#) [15], [Matt Walsh](#) [16], [Ed Furman](#) [17] and others at the [Lakeshore Theater](#) [18] for “[Horatio Sanz and the Kings of Improv](#) [19],” which is presented by the [Upright Citizens Brigade](#) [20].

“These guys just love to play,” Dorff said – speaking of the ensemble – in an interview with HollywoodChicago.com.

He has performed with them all many times in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago over the last decade. Dorff added: “Matt and Horatio would just upend some milk cartons and perform on them. That might be a new show we’re working on. I don’t know.”

All of the performers have a connection to Chicago and originally were seen on the stages of Second City, iO, the [Annoyance](#) [21] and other comedy clubs around town. In New York, the players can be seen regularly at the [UCB Theatre](#) [22] as part of Sunday night’s [ASSSSCAT Improv](#) [23] show.



Horatio Sanz.

Photo credit: iO West

Tuesday's show will closely follow the [Armando Diaz Experience](#) [24] format for improvisation made popular at iO.

Originally created by [Adam McKay](#) [25], [David Koechner](#) [26], Dorff and the namesake [Armando Diaz](#) [27], the "experience" is an improvised long-form show based on a performer's personal monologues. Who will be doing the monologues on Tuesday has yet to be decided.

"It's not very structured," Dorff said. "We're really good at working together. We'll rely on what we're feeling at the time. We might do a shared monologue experience and bring a lot of order out of that."

He bases everything on what he learned training with iO founders [Charna Halpern](#) [28] and [Del Close](#) [29]. Dorff finds himself working with a lot of the same people again and again.

When [Tina Fey](#) [30] was casting the pilot episode for the hit show "[30 Rock](#) [31]," she called on Dorff for a role in the cold opening. [Robert Smigel](#) [32] knew Dorff from working together on [Conan O'Brien](#) [33]'s show and cast him in an episode of "[TV Funhouse](#) [34]".

Even some of the other writers on "Late Night" were on Dorff's first improv team in Chicago. Other work comes the old-fashioned way: auditioning. Last summer, Dorff called in to meet with famed comedy casting director [Allison Jones](#) [35] for this season of "[The Office](#) [36]".

The result was a role as an ex-client of Dunder Mifflin who was unimpressed with character Michael Scott's gift basket. Writing for "Late Night," however, takes up 50 to 60 hours a week and the majority of Dorff's time. He's not complaining.



Frank Caeti (MADtv, on left), Armando Diaz and Kevin Dorff (on right).

Photo credit: ImprovMatchGame.com

"We love what we do. We're happy to go in early and stay late. We're happy to sleep on couches in our offices," explains Dorff of his life before the writer's strike, which began on Nov. 5.

He admits to only having an anthill view of the complex currently between the WGA and the major studios.

Dorff added: "What some people forget is that nothing going on. Nothing is being made and it's affecting everyone down to the PAs and interns who are trying to learn about what it's like to work in this business."

Of the more than 10,000 members of both branches of the writer's guild, only a few hundred are comedy writers.

"It's weird how serious these [comedy writers] are taking this," Dorff said as he became more dynamic on the subject. He says the frustration comes from not being able to do what you love.

"It has been a long time since the contract has been updated," Dorff said. "It's based on a VHS-rental model. They need to bring it in line with the current generation of media. I can't even find a Blockbuster [any more]. Can you? I hope [the strike is] as short as however it can be."

WGA negotiations are [set to resume](#) [37] on Nov. 26. Beyond that, there are changes on the horizon for Dorff's career at "Late Night".



Matt Besser and Amy Poehler.

Photo credit: iO West

Ever since it was announced that Conan O'Brien would be taking the reigns of the "[Tonight Show with Jay Leno](#) [38]" when Leno steps down in 2009, it has spawned questions about changes in everything from the content and location.

"You'd have to ask [NBC Universal President] [Jeff Zucker](#) [39] about that," Dorff said while explaining that all the decisions are to be worked out with the producers of the show. The writers are only more concerned with the day to day.

Dorff added: "We do shows five nights a week. When we go in on Monday, we have no idea what's happening on Thursday much less in 2009."

Dorff instead puts his faith in Conan O'Brien. He added: "Conan's instincts are great," Dorff said as he described his admiration of the host and executive producer as a comedy writer. "His work ethic is infectious. He makes people motivated."

Right now, though, he is more concerned with being back in his hometown and performing with old friends. Last week, Dorff, [Rachel Dratch](#) [40] and [Tim Meadows](#) [41] sat in on an improv set at Second City after doing a panel at the Chicago History Museum.

When the rest of the kings of improv are in town and they meet up for dinner, they might decide to make an impromptu appearance at iO. After all, these are people who just love to play.

"That's the best thing about being in Chicago," Dorff said. "People just pull up their sleeves and get to work."

Kevin Dorff will be performing with "[Horatio Sanz and the Kings of Improv](#) [19]" on Tuesday, Nov. 20 at the Lakeshore Theater in Chicago. Tickets are [available here](#) [42] or by calling 773-472-3492.

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