

Interview: ‘Weekend Workbench’ Host Ryan Salzwedel’s Do-it-Yourself Fix

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- [Alaric S. Rocha](#) [2]
- [Chicago](#) [3]
- [CLTV](#) [4]
- [Denial](#) [5]
- [DIY](#) [6]
- [DIY Network](#) [7]
- [Do It Yourself](#) [8]
- [Grand Rapids](#) [9]
- [HGTV](#) [10]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [11]
- [Home Improvement](#) [12]
- [Host](#) [13]
- [Interview](#) [14]
- [Michigan](#) [15]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [16]
- [Ryan Salzwedel](#) [17]
- [Tim Allen](#) [18]
- [Weekend Workbench](#) [19]
- [WGN-TV](#) [20]

CHICAGO – Locally produced TV shows are old school, but WGN-TV in Chicago has had a long tradition of that type of show and hosts. Tapping into the legacy of Ray Rayner and Bozo the Clown, local programming is making a comeback, and one of the newest WGN-TV hosts is Ryan Salzwedel of “Weekend Workbench.”

“Weekend Workbench” is a simple concept – break down common household repairs that on the surface are complex (think installing a ceiling fan) into simple steps that anyone can follow. Ryan Salzwedel represents that “anyone” on the show, as he demonstrates with experts what tools are necessary and how to tackle the chore with plain language.



Keeping the World Safe for Do-It-Yourself: Host Ryan Salzwedel of WGN-TV’s ‘Weekend Workbench’

Photo credit: WGN-TV

Salzwedel has injected his slightly skewed personality into the show, and highlights include his blooper reels, [which he posts on the YouTube](#). [21] He was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and moved from there to Chicago in his twenties to study improvisation with The Second City in 2003. He had been an exclusive working performer and host for about two years when he landed the gig on “Weekend Workbench.” The WGN-TV show is in its second season, with new episodes every Sunday at 11am Central Time.

Ryan Salzwedel sat down to talk with HollywoodChicago.com about his status as a local acting and hosting treasure, and his path to the workbench.

HollywoodChicago.com: These days, there is a couple of networks devoted to shows about fixing things up. What is different about ‘Weekend Workbench’ that sets it apart from the usual fix-it show?

Ryan Salzwedel: Our concept differs because on those other shows it’s usually about a professional contractor telling other people what to do. On our show, we pair that pro with an “Average Joe” – represented by me – who is actually taught how to do the repair or installation. We do it step-by-step. We don’t pigeonhole the projects, we do home improvement, salvage, even crafts.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the blueprint for the show? Did it come from parts of other similar concepts out there?

Salzwedel: As far as I know, we’re wholly original. WGN-TV wanted a DIY show, because the market for it is huge, and that got the ball rolling.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think it was about your audition that landed you the gig? Do the people who hire you ever tell you that?

Salzwedel: I’d like to say it was because I’m NOT a simpleton, but once I got on there I realized that they did want that simple guy – who didn’t know anything about fix-it and was self-deprecating about it. I actually auditioned for WGN’s food show, ‘Chicago’s Best,’ and did a piece for them at Navy Pier. My ability to work in the surroundings and interact with the kids at the Winter Wonder Fest at the time, and not be afraid to make fun of myself, is what landed me the host role.

HollywoodChicago.com: Are you the type that can never watch the finished product once you tape an episode, or do you use the result to hyper analyze your genius?

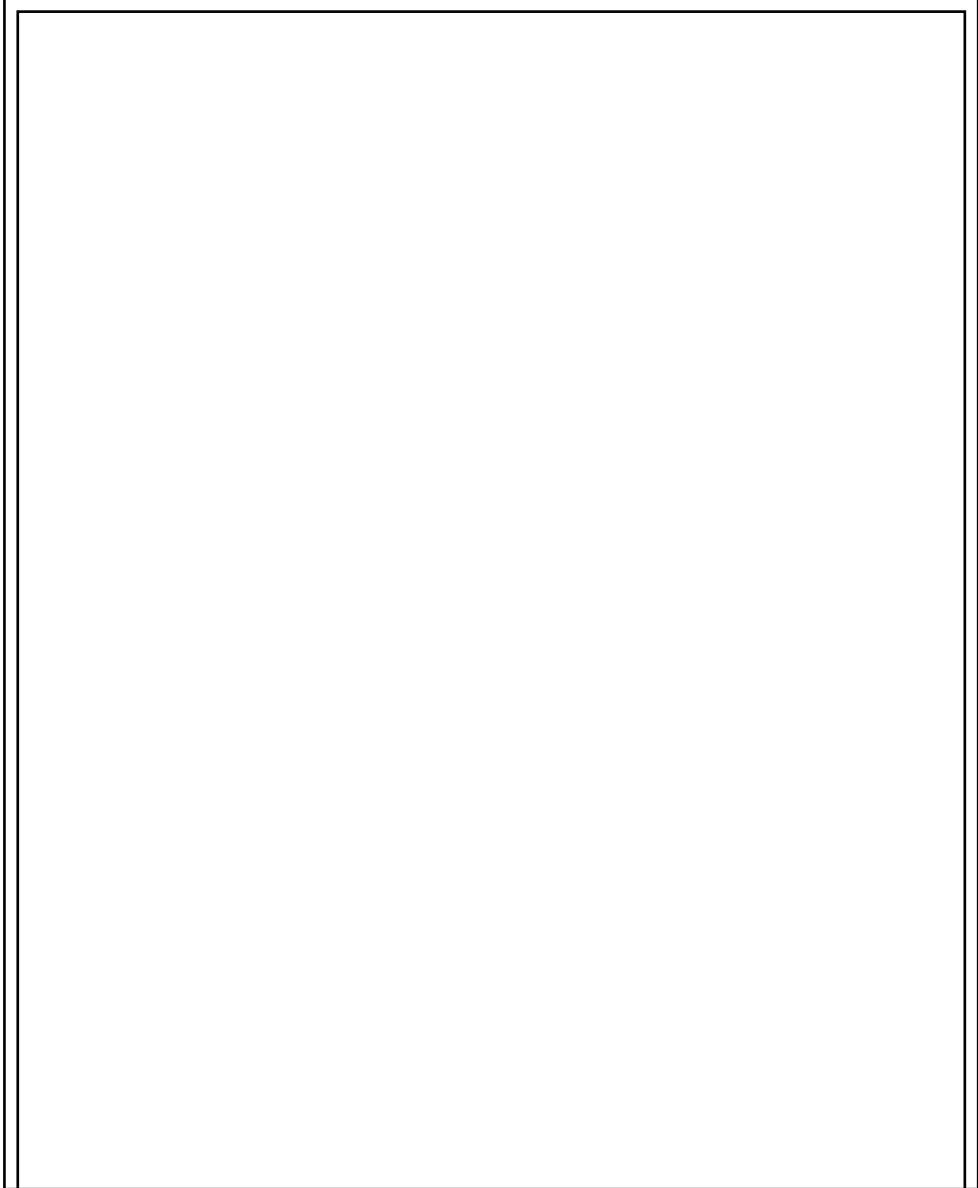
Salzwedel: Actually, if I do go back and watch it, it’s because I’m doing the same project at home. When I’m taping something, and move on to the next thing, I tend to forget what I did before. In the midst of using power tools, and moving a segment along, the last thing I’m doing is absorbing any of the knowledge of what’s being presented. [laughs] So I had to install a ceiling fan at home, and went back to Season One and watched that segment to learn how to do it.

I am critical of my performance, and it’s hard to watch. You don’t want to be in the room when you’re watching yourself, and somebody else walks in. My son, who is eight, will walk into the room and say, ‘oh, Dad’s watching his own show again.’ I usually say, ‘dude, how cool is it to have a Dad on TV?’ He just says, ‘it’s not cool at all.’

HollywoodChicago.com: What are your favorite types of projects on the show, since you have two seasons under your tool belt?

Salzwedel: I like the craft projects – last season a woman in the Andersonville neighborhood in Chicago taught me how to do hanging flower baskets that were really cool. I made some for our home and I made one for my Dad. I like the creative side of the projects, because that’s my background.

HollywoodChicago.com: Image is such an important element to your ‘brand’ as a performer or host. What do you think ‘Weekend Workbench’ has added to your personal brand or character in the hosting marketplace?





Da Ryan! Host of 'Weekend Workbench'

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Salzwedel: It's been pretty good, for example last year we were surprised that the show was nominated for a Midwest Emmy. It legitimized the show, which at that point was on the borderline for renewal. So the Emmy helped on that front, and also because it's produced by the Tribune Company and WGN-TV, that goes a long way in the business to have those kind of names behind you.

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you think you're establishing a 'host personality' that can be transferred to other shows in the marketplace?

Salzwedel: I hope so, and I don't want to exclusively be a do-it-yourself host. I like doing it, and I get calls asking me if I want to continue with it perhaps on a national level – because currently it's a hot theme and market on TV – and I'm not opposed to it. But there is only so much room for someone with a comedic acting background in that field, and for the most part it's a serious topic. They're working with bigger power tools and other people's money a lot of the time.

Getting the job was the most important thing. I'd been working and scratching for a lot of years, and somebody recognized me by giving me a paid gig. Everybody says 'do what you love,' but also 'do what you love and get paid.' We all have to eat.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've been a journeyman actor and performer for close to ten years. What was behind your decision to give it a go full time, as opposed to doing something else?

Salzwedel: Two years ago, I had finally got to the point in which I could quit all my side jobs, and concentrate on being a performer. It was tough to come to the realization that this was it, and I thought once I got the hosting gig I have now it would be a huge fulfilling moment – but there is always, 'what's next?'

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the best things I've seen you do as an actor is a short film by hot local director Alaric Rocha, 'Denial,' about a couple who have reached the end of their ability to communicate. How did that script resonate with you and what can you tell me about the emotions you and your co-star Grace McPhillips were trying to express?

Salzwedel: From what I recall, Alaric was just starting out, and we actually shot that piece in his apartment in the Edgewater neighborhood. I was in an acting group with Grace, and she asked me to do the film with her. When I see it now, it was way intense, but I did it to keep piling up experiences that help me to be a better actor. The character did resonate for me because I'm the king of communication issues. [laughs] It worked I think because I'm somewhat of a closed-off person in my relationships, so to do a character like that wasn't much a stretch.

HollywoodChicago.com: You also are a blogger for Chicago Parent magazine. What are the challenges and rewards of raising a child in an urban environment as opposed to elsewhere, in your point of view?

Salzwedel: What I loved about raising my son in the city is the diversity. I didn't grow up with that, and didn't know any of it until I moved here. Everything flows off my son's back. There are challenges like the crime and the schools are tricky, but it's all been good. He is also exposed to the arts in what I do – he's appeared on the cover of the magazine with me, and he's appeared as an extra in a couple of films I've done.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, since you and fellow Michigan native Tim Allen share the same ‘comic DIY’ crown, what do you observe about him that you find similar to yourself? And who would win in a fist fight, and why?

Salzwedel: I used to work in a sports bar in Grand Rapids, and he used to participate in a Grand Prix race up there, and he really was an idol of mine. When you grow up in Michigan, and you want to be on TV, you want to find the people from there who are on TV, and that was Tim Allen. Knowing that he made it out of Michigan – and it wasn’t the cleanest ride out – and became Buzz Lightyear is amazing to me. I’ve always been drawn to that, and worked on putting that energy into getting out of Michigan in the same way. I love my hometown, but after a couple days I’m ready to come home to the city.

As for a fist fight, now I think I would win. But if he was on one of those binges from his younger days, forget it. [laughs] I’ve always actually had a ton of respect for him.

Season Two of “Weekend Workbench,” hosted by Ryan Salzwedel, continues on Sundays at 11am CST on WGN-TV, Channel 9, with repeats on CLTV on Saturdays at 10:30am. Check local listings for channel locations on cable or satellite systems. [Click here](#) [22] for the “Weekend Workbench” YouTube channel, and [click here](#) [23] to watch the short film, “Denial.”



[24]

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