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arts & entertainment

Risky business

These four women make up plays on the spot, writes JILL FRASER

THEY are American, reckless and ready to improvise. They call themselves goga, and viewers of a certain sort of film will know exactly what that means.

"It stands for a girl-on-girl action," says founding member Karen Herr, leaving an obviously practiced dramatic pause large enough for even the slowest inquirer to pick themselves up off the floor.

"It's a fun risqué term in the world of porn films," she continues. "It means girls kissing."

OK, where to go from here?

Herr comes to the rescue. The name is simply a marketing ploy to grab attention, she explains. The group is neither a gay act nor a porn show. In fact, goga are so clean they even try not to use "blue language".

These four attractive and very physical women, Annie Figenshu, Kellee Santiago, Karen Eleanor Wight and Herr, have mastered the art of long-form improvisation.

Each show is unscripted and begins by creating a play out of a movement. It's an extended, more perilous version of the short-form variety used in comedy or theatre sport.

All the women have solid backgrounds in dance, classical theatre and music, and they hit the stage with an ensemble of energy.

"We're very active," Herr says. "It's extreme theatre in the physical sense. That's extreme with two Xs," she laughs describing how they leap around on stage allowing the theme for the night to develop organically.

"The excitement comes from knowing that it's being created at the same time that you're seeing it. So the actor and the audience are sharing the discovery.

"We frequently break the 'fourth wall' and do scenes within the audience," she warns.



Watch out: the US group goga says they've "been to see some footy practice, so expect to see plenty of references".

Picture: CRAIG WOOD

Goga are also in the habit of taking an audience member up on stage as part of the show. But it is never confronting or embarrassing.

"We know who is going to feel comfortable," she says. "If someone is sitting there with their arms folded, we'd never choose them."

Improvisational theatre began in the US about 40 years ago, and is concentrated in New York and Chicago. Besides the need for

theatre skills, troupe members are selected according to their ability to perform uncompetitively within the group. The idea is to support and build on each person's contribution, so they steer clear of anyone who is likely to want to shine alone.

"The most important thing about improvising is to have a spirit of play and a non-judgmental attitude to what you or others have to offer," says Herr.

She boasts that goga never repeats a theme. "That would feel like cheating."

But goga is not beyond incorporating the spirit of the country they are visiting into their show.

"We've been to see some footy practice, so expect to see plenty of references," she laughs.

goga, Felix Loft, 41-43 Fitzroy St, St Kilda, until April 21. Tickets: \$19/\$15. Bookings: 1300 660 013.