

Montrealers' dépanneur comedy makes it to final round of national competition

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Danny Belair, left, Alain Mercieca and Erin Hall, the team behind Dépflies.

John Mahoney / Montreal Gazette

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It's a scene familiar to most Montrealers: the local dépanneur and the cast of characters therein. The stuff of high comedy with a dollop of social/cultural realism, to boot.

And that scene — amped with even more hilarity — could soon make its way to the small screen across this dominion. A team of highly imaginative, albeit highly fevered Montrealers has made it to the Final 5 in the first ComedyCoup competition with Dépflies, their bilingual, quirky take on life from inside a St-Henri dépanneur.

In September, Toronto-based CineCoup teamed up with CBC-TV and Just for Laughs to launch ComedyCoup, an endeavour designed to give wannabe wits across Canada an opportunity to create their very own half-hour prime-time TV comedy special. The winning entry would not only have its submission green-lighted for a pilot production, but would also receive \$500,000 toward its creation. And if said pilot managed to amuse Canadians, well, it could even lead to a regular sitcom series on the CBC.

More than 250 teams from across the land took up the challenge and put together 90-second teasers for the public to scrutinize and judge. Two months, six video shorts and two rounds of public voting later, there are now but five finalists in the competition, with the winner to be announced Saturday in Whistler, B.C., following the comedy equivalent of a shootout with the contestants in front of a live audience.

Based on an eight-play series

Alain Mercieca, the ever-animated comic/playwright and part-owner of Théâtre Sainte-Catherine, stars as *dép* co-boss Peter, the ringmaster for the parade of eccentrics and hipsters who pop in for nightly rounds of pontification and for occasional purchases of brew and chips. The concept for this sitcom is based on an eight-play series concocted by Mercieca, also one of the producers of *Dépflies*.

“The idea was that the *dépanneur* serve as a sort of tragicomedic platform to skewer various subcultures and popular cultures and to really delve into Montreal, celebrating its diversity and true bilingualism,” says Mercieca, 33, over coffee in the Théâtre Sainte-Catherine café. “Then we just developed characters from the live shows that we had done previously. And, of course, while I was at it, I wrote myself into the walls of this *dép*.”

Among the other “flies” in *Dépflies* are Elizabeth Fennell as Peter’s half-sister, Marie-Isa, and co-owner of the *dépanneur*; Lise Vigneault as Zoe the Punk; Simon Chavarie as Roger; Sandi Armstrong as Nancy; Maité as Virginie; and Heidi Lynne Weeks as Pamela Filosa, the diabolical real-estate agent who dreams of converting the *dép* into a condo.

Art imitates life

It seems that art imitates life slightly here. Mercieca allows that his relationship with Marie-Isa is not unlike the one he has with his Théâtre Sainte-Catherine partner, Mark Louch.

“I’m more of the dreamer and poet, and Mark is the hard-working one who always gets things done, which is why the theatre remains intact. So it is with Marie-Isa at the *dép*. I wish she would dream more, and she wishes that I would work more,” Mercieca explains.

Director and co-producer of *Dépflies* is Danny Belair, who collaborated with Mercieca on a short film three years ago that also paved the way for this sitcom.

“Alain first created the world in his plays, but I helped create the world around it in the film,” notes Belair, 28.

“Danny is really the one who brought this vision of ours from stage to screen,” Mercieca acknowledges. “That’s everything to me. That’s what has made us valid in ComedyCoup. Had I done it, it would have been a lot of close-ups of my face on screen.”

If *Dépflies* does win, it could prove to be groundbreaking for Canadian TV. It would maintain its bilingual approach.

“That’s the whole charm of it,” Mercieca says.

“I would be very surprised if it didn’t stay bilingual. I feel there is a way for the CBC to make it work as a bilingual show and not to compromise on the essence of it. It really is quite an accurate slice of life

| *for many of us in the city, certainly in the St-Henri area in which I live and where Dépfliés is set.*”

Though the show is set in St-Henri, the dépanneur they have been shooting in for the competition is in the Plateau.

“It was the only dépf that we could get, but it was perfect for what we wanted to do,” Belair says.

Mercieca doesn’t believe that winning the \$500,000 production prize will change his life.

“Thank God, I’m older and more mature now at 33. If I were younger and were to win, I fear I would go downhill fast with cocaine and hookers,” he cracks. “But having a wife and three kids, like I do, tends to put you on a different track. I would just love to be a regular human and get this show made.”

Tough competition

Mercieca does concede that the competition is tough. He is a fan of the work of the four other finalists: Charlie & Yoni from Toronto; Charlottetown’s Wharf Rats; and Graham Clark: Wilderness Man and HumanTown, both from Vancouver.

Each of the teams will be making a 10-minute presentation — including a video highlights package and a Q&A with the judges — before final judgment is rendered Saturday at Whistler.

“It will be tricky, because we have to woo the audience yet convince the judges that we are professional enough,” Mercieca says.

“Everyone has a solid pitch and an angle. But I’d have to say that ours is a bit more developed, because we’ve done the plays and film and because our team has been invested in the concept for a while now.”

CBC has actually taken an option on the work of all five finalists. So it is conceivable that all could see the light of the tube one day.

“I’m obviously biased and think that Dépfliés is totally unique and that Canadians would really love it,” Belair says.



Erin Hall, Alain Mercieca, centre, and Danny Belair: "This whole exercise has been like going to a summer camp for comedians, but with me ending up in the role of counsellor," Hall says.

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Adds Mercieca: "We don't often get to see this view of Montreal on television. In the rest of the country, the joke is always about bilingualism. With us, though, bilingualism is just the reality, and we are coexisting.

"But the big thrill for us is that we're being exposed to a much larger audience than we've ever had before and to see how this has resonated with people across Canada. It validates the project even more."

Last words go to Erin Hall, 32, part of the producing triumvirate: "This whole exercise has been like going to a summer camp for comedians, but with me ending up in the role of counsellor."

To check out Déplifies, go to comedycoup.cbc.ca/depflies

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