

# INDEPENDENT LIFE

FRIDAY THROUGH THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14-20, 2007 — PAGE 21



# Laughter and lottery

Amy House celebrates turning 50 by working on her 'theatre legs' with a new whirlwind one-woman show

By Stephanie Porter  
*The Independent*

On the day Amy House turns 50, she intends to be doing what she loves most: making people laugh.

The big day — Jan. 19, she's not afraid to admit — comes partway through the scheduled run of *Scratch and Pull*, House's latest one-woman theatre show, at the LSPU Hall. The play promises to be a playful, non-stop romp of a comedy as House plays 13 different characters — male, female, young and old — in and around a corner store in rural Newfoundland.

"It's a fun show to do," says House. "But it is challenging as you get older because, not only is it the learning of the lines, but the contortions you have to get into to play all those parts ... and I'm getting lower back problems."

She bursts out laughing. Maybe there's some truth to what she's saying, but House

certainly shows no sign of losing her love of theatre or her infectious energy. She seems barely content to sit down and talk, gesturing frequently, laughing loudly, jumping up to tell a story.

Theatre has been a constant in House's life since she took on her first role in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in high school in Stephenville. ("Well, I worked in a bank for a bit," she corrects, "but I did community theatre on the side.")

She's long since made a name for herself as one of the province's leading ladies of comedy — though she also thrives in more dramatic, serious roles. House's other regular gigs come by way of private functions and corporate events; her sharp comedy brightens up dozens of luncheons, dinners and conferences each year.

From parts in Rising Tide's annual *Revue*, a role in Mary Walsh's *High Seed* to frequent collaborations with Bemis Stapleton, House rarely has much time away from the stage.

She's been working hard away from the floodlights, too. For the past six years, House has been putting her experience in the arts to good use as artistic animator of RCA Theatre at the LSPU Hall, driving the operations through highs and lows.

She admits her position has brought its fair share of challenges; it probably always will.

"When I first started, we were in a bit of a crisis too, and you know, the five-year cycle, we had a bit of a bumpy ride last year, but I'm very optimistic," she says. "We have a very strong new board and ... we're booked, we're flat out again. We're busy, we've got great staff, and things are moving ahead."

She throws an arm towards the ceiling.

"Can't kill us with a stick!"

But it is this new play that occupies House's heart and mind at the moment. Although she's always got performances on her schedule, it's been a while since she shouldered the weight and responsibility of her own show; she's calls it her "breakout."

House has been working on *Scratch and Pull* for almost three years now, writing, re-writing and workshopping it over time, often with the help of director Barry Nichol. Earlier versions of the play have been performed at the Gros Morne, Stephenville and Grand Bank Theatre Festivals.

For the St. John's premiere, House has enlisted Greg Malone to direct.

"It's very much up Greg's alley," she says. "He's a great character actor; a great mentor for me too, in this show."

In its original incarnation, House used no props and no costumes.

"It was me, doing all of these characters, and I created the space just with my movement and you very soon found out where the counter was, where the door was, where the window was, where the turnips were, just by the way I was moving around the space, you could visualize the store."

# 'A great gift'

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Malone will be adding a few set pieces and, to add to the colour, perhaps a few examples of the pull tickets at the centre of the story.

"The premise of the show is a woman who has a gambling addiction," says House. "Or, she's recovered from a gambling addiction, she hopes ... but she has blackouts. So something's gone missing and she doesn't know if she's guilty. She's got to examine her conscience and her footsteps ..."

"Over the course of the play we meet all the people who come into the store: the guy who hangs outside the door, with his pants hiked right up," says House, miming putting on the offending trousers, "and Faith Slaney, who has 13 youngsters and brings them all into the store while she's doing her scratch tickets and Nevada tickets ..."

She's still trying to work in another character: the customer stuck in line behind the person at the cash opening all the tickets.

"Because we've all been that person — you're standing there with your bread and your milk and just thinking, 'My God will you let me at that counter.'"

Pull tickets are practically an institution in Newfoundland, and House has no qualms about using the lottery as a springboard for an evening of theatre.

"As an actor and a writer, my challenge is to create the best work I can," she says. "I've lived in outport Newfoundland and I've lived in our cities. I think our outports are more extraordinary and interesting than a lot of our cities; so that's where I find I end up going all the time. I feel I have an understanding of that culture."

While House says it's "a great gift" to work and collaborate with a larger cast — or any cast at all — the one-woman show has a particular appeal. For one, it's convenient, since she has a day job throughout most of the year and can work on a project on her own time. During down time at the Hall in the summer, she's got the freedom to take her work on the road — it's also relatively cheap and hassle-free to tour, which she hopes to do extensively later in 2008.

"There was one year I did some theatre with RCA Theatre company but I haven't been doing a lot," she says. "I have to fight hard to keep my theatre legs, and that's what I'm fighting for. Because eventually I'll have to leave the hall and I won't have a job anymore and I'll go back to theatre."

"And to be able to do all those characters is such an outlet. And to make people laugh. I love to make people laugh and have a good time."

*Scratch and Pull runs at the LSPU Hall Jan. 17-20, tickets available at 753-4531.*