

For the week of February 10, 2011

## Theatre

### How We First Met: Unique Valentine Treat

By Lynn Ruth Miller  
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“Falling in love consists of uncorking the imagination and bottling the common-sense.” -Anonymous

“How We First Met is the perfect way to celebrate Valentine’s Day whether you’re on a blind date, going steady or have been married for longer than you can possibly imagine,” says Jill Bourque, who dreamed up the idea ten years ago. “I created the show as a response to the plethora of improv comedy that was very ‘shticky’ and not based on any true emotions. I really wanted to push the boundaries to see what could happen if we used stories from real people.”



Jill Bourque in How We First Met. Photo by Shannon Casey.

And what happened was an instant success on Valentine’s Day, 2001 at SF’s Bayfront Theatre and has played in dozens of cities worldwide. The production has featured hundreds of couples over the years, all united by a common desire to celebrate the love they have for each other. “The very first show sold out and was a heartfelt and hilarious adventure,” says Bourque. “I remember clearly that the audience was ‘pin drop’ quiet during the couple interviews. And when the stories were acted out, the laughter came in great rolling waves. It was a cathartic and exciting moment that I had never before experienced in improv comedy. I knew that we were onto something special.”

The experience that planted the seed for the show actually happened at Bourque’s own wedding reception because all the guests asked her how she and her husband met. That was when she realized that people are fascinated by stories of how others fall in love.

The current production features improv actors Laura Derry, Paul Erskine, Scott Keck and Deborah Wade, keyboardist Jerome Rossen and technical improviser Damon Paiz. Bourque is the show's emcee. "It's very much a collaborative effort," says Bourque. "Most of the cast has been with the show since the very beginning. Paul Erskine and Laura Derry were both in the very first show in 2001."

In each performance, Bourque interviews three couples live on stage about that special moment when chemistry connected them and they knew they were in love. The improv cast then transforms their story into real-life sketches and songs. "There is a sort of alchemy that happens when a real-life couple steps on the stage to tell a story," said Bourque. "The audience identifies with them and becomes charmed."

In order to be part of the show, couples must submit their profiles to [howwefirstmet.com](http://howwefirstmet.com). The selection is narrowed down to ten couples through online voting, and audiences choose their favorite lovebirds on the night of the performance. Bourque feels it is her job to create a safe space for couples to relay their special moments in front of an audience. Her intention is to combine real life experience with improv to create comedy and genuine emotions. "Everyone is capable of being interesting," she says. "Every life is interesting. Sometimes you just have to dig to find it."

How We First Met started because of Bourque's determination to create a uniquely imaginative theatrical experience. "What I didn't expect was to be so surprised and inspired by the stories I hear," Bourque says. "I thought by now I would have heard it all, but I continue to be amazed at the way love happens." She concludes, "As a host sometimes, I think I'm like a therapist. But I'm not going to lie. The couple on stage is having the best time of all."

How We First Met on Feb. 12 (Sat 8pm) at Herbst Theatre, 401 Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco. Tickets (\$25 to \$59) call (415) 392-4400 or at [howwefirstmet.com](http://howwefirstmet.com).