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Entertainment lawyer says 'yes, and' to launching his own cinematic career

Second City improv classes spark partner's interest in acting; cast in two indie projects

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Ryan B. Jacobson doesn't just practice entertainment law — he entertains.

Jacobson, a partner at SmithAdmundsen LLC, has acted in two independent films since taking five improvisational comedy classes and one acting class at The Second City Training Center.

"At some point, you need to let your hair down and act a little goofy and remember you're a human being or a parent and not just a guy that goes to work every day in a suit and pocket square," Jacobson said.

He's been practicing entertainment, media and technology law for more than 16 years.

"I like it a great deal because it gives me an opportunity as a suit to support and enhance the creative community and protect their interests so that they have free rein to keep us laughing, clapping or dancing," he said.

While his father and mother were creative types in the fashion and art industries, Jacobson said he never took an acting class during his school years.

"As many kids rebel against their parents, I was the guy with short hair wearing a suit, or ready to wear a suit," he said.

His daughter, 8-year-old Riley, loves to act and sing. And he credits her for sparking an interest in a new way to express himself.

"Every once in a while, she'll tie me back in and make me do YouTube videos," Jacobson said.

He and Riley recently released a three-minute lip sync to pop

star Meghan Trainor's single "Me Too" where Riley dances in a tutu and suspenders and he wears sunglasses and fake-tattoo sleeves. Jacobson edited it himself and said a few of his film production clients said he did just great.

When Jacobson signed his daughter up for a musical theater class at The Second City, she said he should take a class too.

"I thought he'd be a good actor," Riley said. "Because he acts a lot."

"It's because I'm dramatic," Jacobson said.

"He's dramatic," she said. "He's funny, too."

"I think she has to say that," Jacobson said.

At the age of 39, Jacobson enrolled in his first theater class. He left the suit and tie in the car to get a break from the law firm every Monday evening for two months of introductory improv.

"He tried to be very low key for some reason," said Thomas Ebenhoeh, one of Jacobson's classmates. "What's this guy up to?" Ball cap, T-shirt, but he'd always be wearing dress pants, so I kind of knew he had a big boy job of some sort."

Most people in the class were 20-somethings who thought comedy was their calling, Jacobson said. Ebenhoeh said he was surprised to find out Jacobson was older than he looked. He wasn't the oldest, though — there was one woman in the class in her '60s. Scott Goldstein, who directs for The Second City classes, said people as old as 80 sometimes sign up for classes.



Ryan B. Jacobson

Jacobson said very little makes him nervous and he expected to be comfortable coming up with clever ideas under pressure. As a lawyer, he's used to having to respond to a judge's question on the spot or re-work arguments during a trial.

But improv was harder than he expected, he said. It's more about feeding off the energy and performance of your fellow performers and the audience than performing alone under pressure.

Jacobson said his intention was to "put the suit back on and return to my day job, a la Clark Kent," but his classmates urged him to take the next class with them.

When Jacobson heard two of his classmates couldn't afford to pay for the next course, he quietly covered their registration with the Second City office.

"It's like going to law school and not practicing law ..."

After class one night at the Old Town Ale House across the theater's Piper's Alley complex, the classmates each shared what they did for a living. There were a couple nannies and a few bartenders. Ebenhoeh was commuting in from a sales job in Michigan. When Jacobson said he was an attorney, Ebenhoeh laughed.

"We never would have become friends if not for this thing," Ebenhoeh said. "This guy's a

lawyer. I'm an actor. Where would we have ever met?"

A year after the first class, Jacobson and his classmates had finished all five levels of improv courses and rehearsed and performed three in three sold-out shows at The Second City. He also took an acting class, which gave him a little bit of an inside perspective on how his actor friends jump into a fictional world.

"I found it very refreshing to be outside of the confines of the courtroom and away from the pressure of having to persuade a jury and being able to just let loose, loosen my tie and play a character solely in the hopes of making somebody laugh after a long day," he said.

Jacobson wanted to see if he could make it in the bigger acting world. Now 41, he auditioned and was cast in two independent films.

"At some point, what's the point of learning if you're not going to put it into practice?" he said. "It's like going to law school and not practicing law or taking the bar and then opening an ice cream shop."

He's been cast in both the independent films he's auditioned for — a small role in Kaitlyn Mekertichian's "The Immediate Unknown" and P.K. Grajnert's "Clean."

He said it's foreign to him, as someone who has risen through the ranks of a law firm and is now one of 22 equity partners, to have to be the one interviewing or auditioning to try to prove he has what it takes. That said, knowing the acting jobs are on the side helps him avoid nerves.

"There is something calming in the fact that if I don't get the part, I still have a full-time day job," he said. "I think it adds maybe to how comfortable I am onstage because I'm not afraid to fail."

"It kind of pisses me off because he has a great job, he's good-looking, and he's funny," Ebenhoeh joked.

Ebenhoeh, now a writer and performer at Storefront Theater, is one of Jacobson's best friends. Jacobson described Ebenhoeh as insanely talented from Day One

and having the kind of organic charm and wit that reminds Jacobson why he belongs in a courtroom more than on the stage.

Jacobson is always pushing Ebenhoeh to meet people in Jacobson's professional network. Ebenhoeh said Jacobson will introduce him to a music producer they might run into at a bar or the owner of the restau-

rant where they're eating. He said sometimes a guy at the front door doing security will recognize him and say, "Oh, you're Ryan's buddy."

"He's kind of made me feel like a VIP in the city," Ebenhoeh said. "He knows a lot of people and now a lot of people at least act like they like me."

Goldstein has been friends with Jacobson since they were in

seventh grade together. Now artistic director at Flat Iron Comedy, alumnus director of The Second City National Touring Company and instructor at The Second City Conservatory, Goldstein is also one of Jacobson's legal clients. He checks in with Jacobson before he or anyone he knows signs anything.

Goldstein said Jacobson's

acting experience makes him better understand the path his talent clients might want to be on and therefore better guide him.

"You can understand something in theory all you want, but until you've practically experienced it, then you don't really know," Goldstein said. "That experience makes me trust him even more."