

NY CULTURE

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## From Failure, Funny Business

By REBECCA ROTHBAUM

For Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson, the path to comedy success started with blown tryouts for an improv team at New York's famed Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre.

The pair of floundering 20-somethings kept their day jobs and launched a web-video series, "Broad City," about the awkward misadventures of floundering 20-somethings. Earlier this month, Comedy Central struck a deal for a TV adaptation set to debut early next year, with Amy Poehler tapped as executive producer.

"We just blindly invested all this time and effort and money, and we had to believe we had to come out on the other side," Ms. Glazer, 25 years old, said in an interview days after her TV deal was announced. "We didn't think it would be this. This is the best possible thing I could imagine."

It helped that for part of the two-year span that Ms. Glazer and Ms. Jacobson have worked on their fledgling web series, they had day jobs at the same office. "It was almost like we did double-time on 'Broad City,'" said Ms. Glazer, "because we worked together and we were always chatting about it."



Andrew Hinderaker for The Wall Street Journal  
Ilana Glazer, left, and Abbi Jacobson, whose 'Broad City' web series is being adapted by Comedy Central.

"It was all that we did," agreed Ms. Jacobson, 29.

"For two years we did not see friends," Ms. Glazer added.

Friends since meeting six years ago as members of an indie improv group, they bartered with other comedians for help they needed to shoot and edit the 35 episodes in the web series. Each absurdist installment typically runs for just a few minutes, blending the cringe humor of "Curb Your Enthusiasm" with the rawness of "Girls."

Both play what they describe as thinly veiled versions of themselves. Sample episode: The Ilana character uses a man for the washer-dryer in his New York apartment. An early appreciation of the show in The Wall Street Journal cited the "sneak-attack feminism" of its humor.

Although they developed something of a cult following, particularly in local comedy circles, the creators maintain that none of the "Broad City" episodes ever became viral hits drawing massive audiences. To this day, neither Ms.

Glazer nor Ms. Jacobson claim to know how many people have ever watched.

A turning point for "Broad City" came after they snagged Ms. Poehler for a role in the second season finale. The pivotal connection came through Upright Citizens Brigade, which Ms. Poehler help found and where the comedians continued to take classes after losing out in their 2009 auditions. Now they host a live show at the Chelsea theater.

After filming, they sent the star of NBC's "Parks & Recreation" sitcom the finished episode, "I Heart New York," which depicts a madcap race through Manhattan in pursuit of fresh-baked cookies from the West Village cafe Joe. Included with the video was a note asking Ms. Poehler if she would serve as an executive producer of a "Broad City" TV show.

"I don't think we were ever like, 'She's going to say yes.' We just thought we had nothing to lose," said Ms. Jacobson. "Getting that email from Amy, that moment was the most life-changing thing that happened to us."

Even before appearing on the show, Ms. Poehler counted herself among the web series' unknown number of fans. "I liked the world of 'Broad City,'" she said via email, "that street level version of New York that includes all the day-to-day challenges of being broke and being surrounded by crazy people."

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“I was impressed by how hard they worked, how close they were and how specific their tone was,” Ms. Poehler added.

Comedy Central bought the pilot for the television series after an earlier deal with another network fell apart.

“There’s a certain grittiness to their web shows that I think our millennial audience responds to,” said Kent Alterman, president of content development at Comedy Central. “They have a real authenticity.”

Ms. Glazer and Ms. Jacobson said the TV version of their show will track the same characters as the web series as they negotiate life in the city, while making room for other players, including Ms. Poehler, who makes a guest appearance in the pilot and has consulted on everything from scripts to casting.

“She’s the ultimate punch-up world champion,” Ms. Jacobson said of her executive producer.

“Amy writes like a director,” Ms. Glazer said. “She has the skill of seeing an idea as it forms.”

Looking back on the duo’s early dreams of becoming improv stars, Ms. Jacobson was relieved to have failed. “Thank God we couldn’t get on those teams,” she said.

“Honestly,” Ms. Glazer added, “the show is so much funnier now.”

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