

WHAM! BAM! MONSTER SLAM!

KAIJU WRESTLING BRINGS HIGH ART
TO THE BATTLE OF GOOD VS. EVIL



KUNG-FU CHICKEN NOODLE



MUNG
WON

HELL MONKEY

怪獣大戦闘

By Geoff Edgers
GLOBE STAFF

Down a dark side street, behind a black door marked by an icon of the infamous Dr. Cube, four men slump around on a dirty canvas. They are ready to wrestle.

They are a grungy lot, minus the steroids packed around them on the pro wrestling circuit. To be honest, they're art students. But like so many of their kind—the Iron Sheik, Rodzilla—they will not reveal their true identities.

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SKY DEVIL

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Kaiju Wrestling Brings High Art to the Battle of Good Vs. Evil

by Geoff Edgers

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Tomorrow, at the Massachusetts College of Art gym on Huntington Avenue, Dr. Cube, Kung-Fu Chicken Noodle, Hell Monkey, and a host of other wrestling monsters climb into the ring for the first Kaiju Big Battel of 2002. These performance-art grapplers, who have played to thousands of fans in recent years, blend the spirit of '50s-era monster movies, contemporary Japanese animation, and the amateur video stylings of Johnny Knoxville, the frequently bruised host of MTV's "Jackass."

Or maybe they just wrestle.

"We have people who are really into art who like it and see it as a performance," says Jason, a.k.a. the American Beetle, an interplanetary freedom fighter and master of the "one-armed backstab." "Then we have people who are just big wrestling fans and couldn't care less about what's conceptual and what's post-modern."

This week, with the Battel approaching, volunteers were hard at work in Jamaica Plain at Studio Kaiju (the term means "mysterious beast" in Japanese). Upstairs, in a small office, they mixed the soundtrack for the event. Downstairs, a team worked on the foam costumes, elaborate get-ups that can weigh 50 pounds.

In the practice ring, which fills most of the open space, the wrestlers, none of them professionally trained, walked through the headlocks, body slams, and sleeper holds in the script.

The Big Battel is as choreographed as an episode of WWF SmackDown!, from the goofy dances of Los Plantanos (The Plantain Twins), to the interview skits that can spark bigger battles than those on the scheduled fight card. Randy Borden, or "Rand" as he's known in the art world, is the pony-tailed, soft-spoken puppetmaster. A graduate of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, he chomps on Pringles as he talks about his most popular idea, this performance wrestling league.

What started as an art school spoof is today the signature event of the company he runs with his younger brother, David, a graduate of Northeastern University's marketing program.

Studio Kaiju LLC sells videos, novelty toys themed to Battel characters, and trading cards. On its Web site, kaiju.com, it offers downloads of fights, news updates, and bios of the wrestlers told in broken English. As for the main event, the Battel, a monster doesn't so much as jump off a turnbuckle unless Borden gives the go-ahead.

"I don't think of it as a wrestling league," says Borden. "It's more of a performance group."

Each Battel is a series of skits. Good in one corner, evil in the other. Tomorrow night, for example, the featured tag-team match finds Los Plantanos taking on the one-eyed Hell Monkey and Super Minion #96. The feud can be traced back to an incident years earlier, when the Hell Monkey mistook the brothers for two giant bananas and attacked them.

The Plantains are out for revenge, ready to crush Hell Monkey, a member of Dr. Cube's posse.

"It's like a play with a crescendo," says Terri Nordone, a fan. "Every once in a while it makes you go, 'Wow.' Somebody will do this outrageous back flip onto a ladder and the thing will break apart. It's wild."

A decade ago, Borden, 31, was one of Boston's most promising young artists, one of a handful of Museum School students recognized as a traveling scholar in 1994. His earlier creation, the Art-O-Matic, dispensed tiny prints at the MFA and, for a short time, the Davis Square MBTA station.

After graduation, he struggled to get placed in galleries. Stiffed by the art scene, he began to think more about the monster wrestling matches he and his friends at school had staged. For him, it had been a natural extension of his childhood, when he collected comic books and spent weekends watching the monster movies on WLVI-TV's "Creature Double Feature." As an adult, he took the larger-than-life characters and adapted them for the ring.

"I really like making art," says Borden. "It was just hard to sell it. This is easy to sell."

Borden creates the monsters, sketching out their appearances. The hard part comes with building the costume, which can take up to six months. That's why of the hundreds of ideas he's had, only 30 monsters exist. (Saturday, at least one new character - Gomi-mon, or "trashman" - will be introduced.)

The early shows were held at art galleries. Later, the collective took to the Museum School's atrium. That's where Nordone, an art supply manager, saw it.

"Working here, you see odd things all the time," says Nordone, 47. "But the Kaiju Big Battel was special. It's more than the WWF. It's not big, sweaty, muscular guys pounding each other. It's these guys dressed as bananas or hell monkeys. There's Dr. Cube, who's awfully scary. And it really appeals across the age spectrum. You'll get old farts like me - and my 8-year-old son loves them."

Borden and his group of wrestlers say they're stunned by the reaction to the Battel. At the most recent show, in the fall, he had to turn away hundreds of people wanting to see it at the Museum School. "It is amazing," he says. "The night of the show I went out and looked at the line and was dumbfounded." To accommodate a larger crowd, Saturday's production takes place at Mass Art, which can hold up to 1,200 people.

This week, in the practice ring in the Jamaica Plain studio, a thin man in Army fatigues, revealed as Pedro Plantain, worked out his routine. Another wrestler circled him, eventually locking arms. Suddenly, Pedro was lifted into the air. After three twirls and a toss, he landed with a boom onto the mat. Pedro clutched his right arm, the wind knocked out of him.

Lift your arms to catch your breath, another wrestler advised, but Pedro was trying to critique just what went wrong. Maybe he had to roll more. Maybe he should have leaned into the fall. With Saturday night approaching, Pedro said he wasn't the least bit worried about getting hurt.

"The plantains are actually the easiest suits to be in," he said. "It's easy to put on; it's not too hot. The plantains are funny, they're cute, they have big smiles.

"And they haven't lost yet."