

When Will I Be a Real Comedian?

Siân Robinson Davies

I love stand-up comedy, both seeing and performing it. I love the simplicity of the form, requiring only chairs, a mic and words. Dealt out with so little effort, words can make you laugh, make you sick, make you change your mind. What I also love about comedy is it's occasional proximity to imminent collapse, which is an inherent part of the rehearsal process being live. It might be that something unexpected happens in the room, a heckler for example, or a momentary lapse in concentration, which causes the comedian to lose that confident sheen.

One gig that I often come back to in my mind was at *Red Raw*, The Stand's newcomer night in Edinburgh. The compère informed us that the next act on was about to do his first-ever gig and when he came out he was so nervous he almost passed out. He could barely speak and just kept stumbling around and puffing out his cheeks as if his head was about to implode. The audience laughed, which gave him courage to stutter his way through his jokes, which weren't anything special, but it was his physical behaviour that was funny. While this might have gone down differently at another club with a less supportive audience, there was something totally exciting about the situation; a complete failure to deliver, like the body collapsing under this immense pressure of our collective gaze and we were all just holding our breath for him, feeling that sense of responsibility, doing our best to get him through.

This is just one example of many awkward gigs I have seen and, while painful, I think they are great. They exemplify all the difficulties and neurosis that occur in everyday communication that we are forced to negotiate. We do all kinds of things to shut out that embarrassment; we block inarticulate people from speaking, we gravitate towards the charismatic, we try to look relaxed when we are not, but when someone is up on stage, putting themselves right out there, you just have to look at it and deal with it.

When I'm backstage before a gig and another comedian asks me if I have been doing this long and I reply that my first time was in 2009, there is an assumption that I have done at least two hundred gigs, whereas I have actually done around fifteen. The comedians I have spoken to are gigging multiple times a week, travelling long distances to dive venues where audiences don't care and performers don't get paid. While I know all this practice is no substitute for interesting content, I cannot help but be impressed by their commitment; each gig an opportunity to refine their skills, respond to the room, and figure out how to deliver the words more effectively. No matter how well I feel my fifteen gigs have gone, I do not have the flexibility of delivery that those who perform so regularly do.

The majority of my time is spent with artists, and comedy's process of thankless trudging on, refining material, practising the same thing over and over and over again, is quite foreign to me. There are equivalents in the art world, but the examples that come to mind are more traditional craft-based practices.

When I did my first comedy gig I considered myself an infiltrator of the comedy world, going in undercover. I thought to myself, *I don't care if they don't laugh because I don't want to be a comedian, I'm an artist.*

I learnt that this was a lie the first time the audience didn't laugh. I did a gig in Copenhagen where there was no sound in the room other than me speaking for the entire ten minutes I was onstage. They didn't even smile. My main memory of that night is one of loneliness; it was a kind of psychological test. This taught me that a) I did want to affect the audience in some way, despite knowing that making an audience laugh does not inherently contain artistic value, b) Being an "artist" has nothing to do with anything. It is utterly meaningless in this context. The only thing that matters is, *do you have good material and do you deliver it well?*, and c) Danish people are less prone to laugh out of politeness than the British.

I quickly discovered that in the comedy world no one cares what you studied, who you think you are, or what you have done (unless it involved hanging out at The Comedy Store in the 80's, and I was busy learning how to talk at the time). In order to call yourself a comedian, you just have to have done gigs, and as anyone can get a gig by asking for one at a comedy night, it's quick, easy and inexpensive to get started. And perhaps, ironically, it's because of the lack of qualifications/certifications/defining moment where you graduate as a comedian, lots of people go into comedy feeling like an outsider, not knowing when they really *are* one. In that way the term 'artist' was a label that I desperately clung onto as a form of protection in case I didn't succeed.

Saying all that, many of the comedians that get me going, get me thinking, are top of their game, weaving complex ideas into experimental forms with impeccable timing and an absolute command of the space. These comedians have often been writing, studying and performing material for the best part of their adult lives. Thinking of my own short comedic path, getting better does equate to becoming more confident, partly because it enables me to be more responsive, it allows me to feel closer to the meaning of the words I am saying, and in turn closer to the audience.

And besides, Beginners Nerves as a comedic strategy has a shelf life. If the guy who did his first gig at *Red Raw* caught on to the fact his nervousness and the breaking down of his language faculties were the good bit of his act, and tried to capitalize on those qualities during future gigs, sooner or later he would become less nervous and it would become a kind of affectation. He would lose his charm and the audience's generosity. Then he would just have to crack on with all the work that makes for a well-crafted show.

To watch *My First Ever Comedy Gig* by Siân Robinson Davies and Diego Chamy visit: www.youtu.be/m0gcfvtHZIM
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