STANDUP COMEDIENNES: KILLING US WITH LAUGHTER

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the social worlds of standup comediennes. Data were collected through participant observation in comedy clubs and in-depth interviews with comediennes. The focus is on their experiences as women in a male ordered occupation. A variety of objective and ideological constraints which women, as a minority, face, are analyzed. Attention is then paid to how they deal with these realities as well as their attempts to integrate their personal convictions into their performances. Problems which are specific to female comics and thus, gender-based, are analyzed from a feminist perspective. It is argued that since standup comedy is based on control and since patriarchy, in its structure and process of socialization, denies women access to control, female standups are faced with varying degrees of resistance. This study suggests that acceptance of female comics is linked to cultural perceptions of women. Thus, resistance to female comics will disappear only if and when society accepts the idea of women sharing control with men.

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"A thesis on comedy, must be fun," is a comment I have heard often in the past year. And it was fun, despite moments of panic and frustration. But no, it's not funny!

I am indebted to all the comediennes I interviewed for their openness and honesty. This project would have never materialized without them.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

> Think 'comedian' and what do you see? A man at a microphone telling jokes. Although it's not the only way of being a comedian, it's seen as the epitome. The modern image is the tortured persona of Richard Pryor, or the dour offensiveness of Bernard Manning...Women standups do not spring easily to mind (Banks and Swift, 1987:1).

Using a feminist perspective, this thesis focuses on women in standup comedy and examines the problems women encounter in an aggressive, often hostile environment. Relying primarily on interviews with comediennes, the descriptions and analyses take into account both the objective realities of the standup career and female comics' subjective perceptions of these realities.

While it would be erroneous to claim outright that according to comics, a woman's place was in the home, they certainly made it clear by their words and actions, that her place was <u>not</u> on the comedy circuit. And she, with very few exceptions, complied, remaining absent from the field until the 1960's.

True, women had been, since the days of vaudeville, lovable comediennes, making their absence in the field of standup all the more glaring. Since this thesis deals primarily with women who operate in the world of standup comedy, we shall not concern ourselves with their presence in films and radio, but limit ourselves to standup which, admittedly, is a small segment of a much larger comedy field. In order to understand why women were barred from this harsh, often crude world, this chapter shall define standup comedy and outline its history, tracing current attitudes towards comediennes all the way back to their roots. Simultaneously, we shall examine the development of standup in light of profound changes in the larger society. Given the inherently aggressive nature of this medium, it quickly becomes apparent that it would have been virtually impossible for women to take part. For decades, standup was considered a most "unfeminine" occupation, historically restrictive to women.

The entry of women into the field of standup comedy coincided with the second wave of feminism. This was also a decade of social upheaval which witnessed changes in attitudes and a sense of rebellion against the old conservative order. Slowly, there emerged a recognition of women's oppression and their abilities. However, it would be taking an overly optimistic view to assume that women were eagerly welcomed onto the nightclub comedy circuit. Rather, they took access, creating their own opportunities, breaking through psychological barriers and demanding the right to be heard. With this outline in mind, let us now turn to a more detailed description of the history of standup comedy.

THE HISTORY

Improvisation, vaudeville, standup comedy - all refer to performances designed to elicit laughter but there are differences between them. Improvisation, a team effort, involves the spontaneous creation of humourous scenes on stage, usually based on audience suggestion. Vaudeville, the oldest of the three, was also a group effort, characterized by a mixture of music, song, dance, acrobatics and humourous patter (Martin and Segrave, 1986:27-30). Its humourous portion usually consisted of gags and one-liners. Standup comedy evolved from vaudeville, and the occasional use of music as well as the use of one-liners are the only remaining traces of this heritage. Essentially, standup is a monologue containing humourous observations and recollections. What distinguishes standup from all other forms of comedy performance is the fact that it is a solo effort.

Despite its current coverage in tabloids and popular magazines, comprehensive historical accounts of standup comedy are virtually non-existent. The few books that devote any space at all to the topic of standup comedy forsake historical accuracy for a

more general description of mood and atmosphere. There is, however, a consensus that standup comedy as we know it in its present form, began in the 1930's. Following the death of vaudeville (as big name comics were lured onto the big screen), nightclubs and resorts began featuring comedians. In fact, the resort hotels, especially those in upstate New York (the Adirondacks, Poconos and Catskills) - otherwise known as the "Borscht Belt" - were among the earliest and most populous training ground for young men with comic aspirations. Most worked long hours for very low pay, making $250 for an entire summer. Aside from performing on stage, they were required to engage in "toomling"- acting the part of joker all day long by kidding around with guests, jumping into the pool fully clothed and performing similar antics. Moreover, at some resorts they were required by owners to discreetly "romance the girls" (Newsweek, 1966:120).

In these mountain resorts, standup still bore a close resemblance to its predecessor (vaudeville) with acts consisting of gags and one-liners strung together, many of them copied out of gag books or stolen from fellow comics.

During the latter half of the 1930's, nightclubs began featuring comedians. It took another decade before their popularity would "catch on", and the late 40's and 50's witnessed a proliferation of nightclubs, especially in larger cities like New York. (To this day, it is in the clubs where the majority of comics learn and perfect their craft.)

The life of a standup comic was far from enviable. He generally worked on the road, playing mostly to drunk, rowdy club patrons, often as a warm-up act to the main attraction (either a singer or a stripper). At the mercy of audience and owners' tastes, he was susceptible to being fired, without pay, after the first night, stranded in rough neighbourhoods of unfamiliar cities. This was the situation faced by all beginners.

Clearly, from its infancy straight through its adolescence, standup comedy offered very few incentives and even fewer rewards. Fortunately, by the mid-50's, a

new type of club had emerged. Condescendingly referred to by old-timers as "chi-chi" clubs, they attracted crowds with more discriminating tastes. While they were seriously outnumbered by the "dives", they encouraged the exploration of a new style of comedy. Gradually, one-liners were dropped in favour of socio-political humour, and routines contained more whimsy and truth. Although these new clubs "brought the cafe I.Q. up a few points and altered expectations" (Berger, 1975:65), the humour went above the heads of most club owners and their patrons. Still, the entry of chi-chi clubs and the death of one-liners signalled the beginning of an evolution of standup comedy and a redefinition of humour.

As the old clubs contemptuously referred to as "toilets" were going under, "chi-chi" ones happily assumed the reins of leadership (Berger, 1975). Elements such as mood, texture and feel of a piece (of material), became integral to a performer's approach. His topics included religion, drugs, issues such as race relations, and he depicted bizarre, outlandish scenarios. This trend led to a veritable explosion in the 1960's, where Greenwich Village became the hangout for new young talent. Poets, folk singers and comics worked for free, passing the hat around after each performance (a practice known as busking), and begging club owners for the chance to do a "quick five" - performing five minutes of original material. Suddenly, standup was popular, topical, all the rage, and many of today's most famous comics (Joan Rivers, Lily Tomlin, George Carlin, Lenny Bruce, Woody Allen and David Brenner, to name a few), perfected their craft in the clubs of Greenwich Village (Berger, 1975). For the most part, comics appreciated the opportunity to play clubs where audiences were receptive, management was friendly, and all tried to relate to comics as styled artists and human beings.

By all accounts, the 60's were exciting and innovative as far as standup was concerned, an ideal climate for would-be comedians. Unfortunately, these glory days of comedy were short-lived. By 1969, the market tightened up considerably as many

clubs either went under financially or opted for a strictly rock and/or jazz music format. Consequently, the 70's were characterized by an almost hostile comedy market, with few places to play and even fewer chances to "make it big". Berger (1975) attributes this reversal to the political weariness and apathy which followed the chaotic 60's. Audiences seemed to have less patience for the hard-hitting socio-political humour which had previously been so popular.

The tightening up of the nightclub circuit did have one advantage - it led to the phenomenal rise of clubs such as The Improvisation. Originally a restaurant owned and managed by Budd Friedman, it soon became a comics' hangout. Being comics, they would often clown around, amusing each other with their impromptu performances. Friedman shrewdly capitalized on this gold mine of talent by allowing comics to perform (Berger, 1975). Standup comedy quickly became the main attraction at The Improvisation. Friedman's policy of letting amateurs perform sight-unseen (although they often did not go on until 3 or 4 A.M.) ensured a steady stream of acts. For the professionals who were given free rein, it was comedy heaven, a place where they could test out new material without fear of bombing (Berger, 1975). Before long, television casting agents specializing in comedy routinely checked out The Improvisation for new talent. On the west coast, The Comedy Store was a similar haven for comics and getting noticed there could lead to the "big time" - a spot on "The Tonight Show". While no books have been written about standup comedy in the current decade, the comments of comics and agents I have spoken to, echo several magazine articles which suggest the 1980's has witnessed yet another comedy revival. Certainly, the proliferation of comedy clubs across North America (including at least two dozen in Canada alone), is an indication of a revival of sorts. A 1985 "Newsweek" article contends that the popularity of standup comedy has led to a supply and demand effect which keeps comics, audiences and club owners happy and in business:

> Somebody has to fill the bill at the hundreds of comedy clubs that have cropped up across America in the last ten years, and so a lot of people who normally would have levelled off at Class Clown...are suddenly in show biz (Leehrsen,1985:58).

Standup comedy has proven to be remarkably resilient, weathering the storm of changes within the industry and the larger society from which it draws its audience. One of these changes is the position of women and we shall now examine the history of standup comedy as it relates to women.

THE "HERSTORY"

In tacky resort hotels, "toilets", classy nightclubs and Greenwich Village, there was no shortage of men who would do anything for a laugh. Women who frequented the clubs did so as audience members, not comediennes. During its first three decades of existence, standup comedy was as restrictive as the priesthood - women were nowhere to be seen. There are several reasons for their absence in this field, all of which must be related to broader social conditions and ideological restraints placed on women. To begin with, standup comedy was practiced in a highly "macho" environment. Moreover, since standup itself was perceived as an aggressive occupation, it was unsuitable for women.

In The Last Laugh, Berger (1975) begins his portrait of standup comics by describing the environment at Hanson's, a New York luncheonette which attracted professional comics, amateurs and fringe lunatics. Here, their conversation, demeanour and antics virtually reeked with machismo and women were treated exclusively as sex objects:

> Women and wages ran one-two with comics working their way up in the business in the 50's. It was an open market both ways...For guys who grew up horny in the 40's, the business was a revelation.It threw them

> into contact with (oo-oo-oo) 'fast women', the dream of every American male of that era...In Han's place, comics came on to girls that wandered in, some of them copping a feel or better in the back (Berger, 1975:23-25).

One comic reminisced about his relationships with women, explaining there was even a name for them : "road broads".

> ...we'd talk a girl into coming back to New York, But once you get back to New York, you didn't want to support them, right?...So you'd have a girl to screw on the way home and we all used to leave them at a wild theatrical hotel...(1975:24).

Arguably, (although Berger himself does not analyze these attitudes), even if women did try to break in as comediennes, they would have been out of their element at Hanson's, where, in the eyes of comics, women were mothers and "broads" but never comediennes. Sexist (by today's standards) attitudes were the norm in an environment infused with coarseness and vulgarity.

Another constraint mitigating against the possibility of women performing standup comedy had to do with the environment in the clubs. Many of the nightclubs in large cities were owned and run by men with Mafia connections and a penchant for strongarm tactics. A comic quickly discovered, the hard and painful way, that it took very little to displease owners and it was to his distinct advantage to remain in their favour:

> They were tough places, and not a few were run by strongarms of varied dissuasions...Those owners were not always susceptible to reasoning...Jack Roy was worked over in an alley for remarks he made on stage - two guys held him in a chair while a third let him have it (Berger, 1975:33-34).

Life on the road could be a very dangerous place for comics and women were neither prepared for nor equipped to function within the hostile environments of the "toilets".

If these structural constraints alone were not enough to keep women out of standup comedy, the ideological realm in which both women and men operated was enough to dissuade them. At the core of this ideology is the pervasive belief that women are not supposed to be aggressive, that to do so would go against their feminine "nature" (Martin and Segrave, 1986:20). Until this ideology was challenged by the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960's, there were no standup comediennes (with the exception of Phyllis Diller, whose career will be examined when we discuss self-deprecation).

It is not until page 355 of a 377 page book that Berger (1975) finally addresses women's absence from the standup comedy field. This is not to fault Berger for committing the sin of omission, but rather, further proof that the "herstory" of women in standup is a brief one. He begins this tale by explaining, almost apologetically, that traditionally, women were the butt of many gags and targets of derision:

> The weight of the word was against them in comedy...To be warm, funny and a lady was a feat worthy of a Carnegie Medal. It took courage for an attractive woman to do the jokes (Berger, 1975:355, emphasis mine).

There is no discussion of why a woman had to be a lady or what is meant by the term, nor is there any speculation on Berger's part as to whether it also took courage for an unattractive woman to do the jokes. Nevertheless, this quote offers insight as to why women were not part of the standup circuit. In the aggressive world of comedy, audiences, club owners and comics accepted the necessity of the macho image and aura of bravado adopted by comics working in a dangerous environment. In fact, Jessica James, who moved from a lounge act to being a solo comedienne, links the immense barriers she faced to the aggression inherent in standup, an art which is, "a very inhuman kind of thing, very unfeminine" (Berger, 1975:359). James recalls:

> Being very, very feminine, like Phyllis Diller is now, doesn't make it because it's such an aggressive thing to do. So most of the men in the business...agents...they'd feel threatened. Very hostile (Berger, 1975:356).

James goes on to describe how, over the course of her career, her own physical stance and posture changed, becoming more typically masculine. To do otherwise was to court doom as a comic.

As indicated by James, this was a problem which plagued Diller, who started off soft and sweet - and was ignored. Critics have accused her of self-deprecation and deliberately making herself look hideous by wearing horrid costumes. Diller does not deny these charges but explains that as the first female standup, performing before audiences who were hostile to the very idea of women as comics, she had no choice but to make fun of herself, thereby turning the aggression inward:

> To make it on stage I had to make fun of myself first. I had to dress funny, I had to cover my figure...Of course I was accused of being self-deprecatory. I've got to be...Comedy is tragedy revisited or hostility. It is mock hostility of course, or it would be ugly (Martin and Segrave, 1986:341).

Martin and Segrave argue that self-deprecation was a necessary survival tactic for other standup comediennes who, by daring to take the stage (and take control) evoked hostility amongst audiences. To deflect this hostility, they had to turn this aggression inward:

> Since females had traditionally had a submissive role, audiences, and males in particular, resisted being influenced by a woman comic. In the past, female comediennes had to be grotesque or scatterbrained...(1986:368).

Thirty years later, comediennes still credit women like Diller and Rivers for being role-models and pioneers. Another trail-blazer was Elayne Boosler, who, over a decade ago, began doing standup from a woman's point of view, refusing to use self-deprecation or to apologize for her attractiveness. Women like Lilly Tomlin began breaking

into standup comedy in the late 60's and continued to do so over the next twenty years. Describing the reaction which greeted women in the beginning, a comedienne remarked, "Somehow, the audience had a hard time accepting hip humour from a woman in pumps and a beehive" (Newsweek, 1984:59). As of 1984, one in three comics who auditioned at The Improvisation and one in ten at L.A.'s Comedy Store was a woman. This Newsweek article concludes that women are accepted in comedy despite having to cope with occasional sexism and harassment. It is true that it is no longer necessary for women to be self-deprecating in order to get laughs. However, as we shall see in greater detail in Chapter 4, most feel compelled to tone down their aggressiveness. Comedy is aggressive and this makes it threatening to many people. Cultural resistance to aggression in women makes female comics doubly dangerous. It is my contention that resistance to comediennes stems from an unconscious fear that allowing women to express themselves in an aggressive manner may possibly undermine the basis for patriarchy. At bottom, aggression is a form of control. Standup comedy involves control - over oneself, one's routine and the audience. Therefore, resistance to female comics is based on the fear of letting women have control, not only over their own occupational choices, but in the case of comedy, over other people. By the same token, obstacles placed before comediennes can be seen as attempts to block their access to this form of control, traditionally a male privilege.

Objectively speaking, anyone, male or female, can become a standup comic. Realistically, only a minority of women (and men) ever attempt it, even though the objective constraints and barriers of the old days have long since been removed. However, subjective constraints - the belief that it is unladylike to be aggressive - are much more subtle, pervasive and effective. Thus, the main constraints against the full fledged acceptance of women into comedy stem from the ideological realm, making them much harder to eradicate. Moreover, these constraints operate on a daily basis in all

forms of social interaction. As Henley and Freeman phrase it, "Social interaction serves as the locus of the most common means of social control employed against women" (1984:465).

Feminists have repeatedly illustrated how ideology, passed on through the socialization process, is internalized. For instance, dealing with what she terms "the mystique of the lady", Fox (1977) describes how this belief operates in women as a normative, internal form of control. "Nice girl" and "lady" are value constructs which demand gentleness, graciousness, kindness, and virtuousness (1977:805) - hardly characteristics one associates with standup comedy. Since these characteristics are attached to one's behaviour rather than being personal attributes and are achieved rather than ascribed, Fox argues that:

> The pressure to act like a 'lady' continues without respite throughout a woman's lifetime...the lady is always in the state of becoming; one acts like a lady, one attempts to be a lady, but one never <u>is</u> a lady (1977:810).

This "lady mystique" then, is a normative code which ensures the internalization of social control over the behaviour of women. Those women who deviate from this norm must take personal responsibility for their obvious lack of virtuousness. Fox concludes that by limiting women's freedom and their potential for control, "the nice girl construct can be seen to facilitate the hegemony of men in a sex-stratified world" (1977:817).

CONCLUSION

We have discussed the career history of standup comedy and briefly described the career history of women in standup. The remainder of this thesis will delve into the careers, experiences and perceptions of individual comediennes. We shall see how despite their unique experiences, they have much in common by virtue of being women

who work in a male dominated field.

Given that there is no blanket category called "women's humour" but instead, variations in content, style, approach and audience interaction, it is not a simple matter to make generalizations about all comediennes. There are women who excel at a more traditionally aggressive style of comedy, those who tone down the aggression considerably, and those who are totally non-confrontative. It would be almost impossible to recognize a typical comedienne, for their acts are as individual as they are.

If this is the case, can one even talk about differences between male and female comics? To do so requires clarification of two basic points. First, even though we cannot identify "women's humour", it is possible to examine gender differences by comparing the historically aggressive style of standup (invented and practiced by men), with newer variations which are characterized by more warmth, openness and gentleness (typically "feminine" traits). Based on my observations, interviews and the literature, women, on average, have explored these variations much more enthusiastically than men (again, on average).

Secondly, although one cannot, in good conscience, lump all comediennes into one category based on their standup routines, the fundamental link between them stems from their common experiences as female practitioners in a male ordered and male defined world.

While, for analytical purposes, it is simpler to keep these issues separate, clearly, for the comedienne herself, the two are inter-related. The external constraints she faces, from sexism to hostility (from fellow comics and the public), inevitably influence her decisions surrounding her own professional approach. Thus, for example, because a comic needs audience approval, and since society interprets aggression in women as "unladylike", a generally strong and aggressive woman may decide to adopt a

less aggressive stage persona in her professional life. On its simplest level then, this thesis is a study of how women perceive the occupation of standup comic along various dimensions, primarily the aggressive nature of the profession itself, the expectations the audience has of female comics and how to reconcile the two. These dimensions, as well as the resulting problems, strategies and solutions have an ideological basis which is located within cultural gender constructs. Each chapter deals with a separate collection of themes on two levels: the objective (concrete obstacles and problems) and subjective (comediennes' perceptions and interpretations of these problems). Each of these themes is then traced back to the notion of comedy as control, and therefore, un-feminine.

In Chapter 3 we shall see how this ideology maintains itself in the very structure and argot of standup comedy performance. Women react to this male defined structure in various ways, many trying to redefine these structures and the very conceptions of humour. We shall examine how women react to the sexism, isolation and resistance from males working in the comedy industry and why this female presence is obviously so disturbing. In Chapter 4 we take a more in-depth look at how the fear of women taking control, the cultural belief that women are not as funny as men and the social admonition against female aggression translate, according to comediennes, into the "dyke myth" - the belief that female comics are unfeminine and therefore, lesbians. The remainder of this chapter, as well as Chapters 5 and 6 describe, in detail, the impression management techniques which comediennes employ to counter the resistance they face without alienating their co-workers and their audiences.

In sum, this is a study of how patriarchy, through both structural dimensions and ideology, operates in a microcosm, and the story of how assertive, talented, indeed courageous women, are challenging this male defined world.

Chapter 2: METHODOLOGY

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Wading through the existing literature on humour is a lot like getting lost in the forest: every turn one takes leads to a different path and while the scenery can be quite breathtaking, finding one's way out of the morass is difficult.

The following literature review focusing on various conceptions of humour in several disciplines, will show how it has been virtually ignored in sociology. Moreover, female standup comediennes have not been studied at all in Canada (and only recently in Britain and the United States).

The first serious analysis of humour can be traced all the way back to Aristotle, who discussed the relationship between the ludicrous inherent in deformity and wit. In philosophy, humour has been conceptualized as a method of deigning superiority over others, or, more charitably, as arising out of incongruity of meaning and surprise twists (see Keith-Spiegel, 1972, for a comprehensive review of humour theories). Why this detour into philosophy? Simply because cultural perceptions of humour determine, to a large extent, the resulting status of the "wit". Historically, although marginalized and treated as a contemptible outsider, the fool had a powerful role to play and only he could insult rulers and kings with impunity.

Not merely confined to philosophy, humour has, in the 20th century, been studied by those working in the field of popular culture. Experiments along these lines concentrate on the values and attitudes displayed in humourous comic strips, cartoons, sitcoms and films. For example, Levine (1976) did a content analysis of eight comedy albums to isolate some typical elements in comediennes' routines. She found that women, more so than men, used self-deprecation, and related this to the issue of status

of women in society - those in power (men) make the jokes at the expense of subordinates (women), and comediennes are merely reflecting this pattern. The gist of this and similar studies is that humour is a highly reliable indicator of our society's values, norms and beliefs. However, none of these studies examine the source of this humour, that is, the creators themselves.

Neither, for that matter, did early psychological explorations into humour. The psychology of humour dates back to Freud (1922), who viewed humour as a form of displaced energy. Taking their cue from Freud, many psychoanalytic theorists have argued that humour, as an expression of hostility, is a disguise for one's neuroses, fears, sexual hangups and masochistic tendencies (see Fisher and Fisher, 1981, for a critique of these theories).

Most of this frantic theorizing of the motivations lurking in the mind of the joke teller was simply that - theorizing based on conjecture. A notable exception to this unfortunate tendency is Fisher and Fisher's (1981) Pretend The World Is Funny and Forever. Using psychological testing and interviews with forty comedians (only seven of whom are women), the authors did not begin with stereotypical notions of the comedians' allegedly disturbed psyches. In fact, they conclude that the hostility of comics' humour coexists with their perceived roles as saviors in a profession subjectively referred to as a calling. True, the aim is still to control audiences, but with the motivation of easing pain. As a group, comedians are no more disturbed or masochistic than the ordinary population. The authors describe them as "peculiar mutant heroes who possess a lot of courage" (Fisher and Fisher, 1981:197).

It must be emphasized that the vast majority of studies of comics concentrated on males. The psychological literature of comediennes is sparse indeed. Attempting to correct this deficiency, Janus et.al (1978) studied fourteen professional comediennes. In general, they concluded that these women were bright, curious, restless, self-educated,

with above average intelligence and vivacious personalities both on and off stage. Interestingly enough, they reported feeling close to their fathers and pitying their mothers. This factor is presented as an explanation for the domestic themes of their material - poking fun at the lot of the average housewife and their own domestic ineptitude. However, Janus also found that the younger comediennes were turning outward in their material, representing themselves not just as girlfriends or wives, but as individuals. However, he concludes that, "This group has not yet gained universal acceptance, for audiences - both men and women - still demand the more traditional roles" (Janus et.al, 1978:371).

The anthropological approach to humour is best illustrated in Apte's Humour and Laughter, (1985), an exhaustive, cross-cultural analysis of humour - its forms, substance and expression in relation to age, kinship, status, role and gender. This ambitious undertaking is noteworthy for devoting an entire chapter to gender inequality in both humourous content and production. Apte argues that cultural restrictions on women's movement and expression, along with the imposition of strict codes regarding modesty and passivity, denied women the freedom and ability to express or engage in humourous activities. He writes, "Although women are no less capable of developing and appreciating humour than men, women have been denied similar opportunities for publicly engaging in humour" (Apte, 1985:18). While this book is an invaluable contribution to our understanding of why so few women have produced humour, it focuses specifically on daily humourous situations and is not concerned with comedians.

Cultural theorists, philosophers and psychologists were studying humour long before sociology deemed it worthy of serious consideration. This unfortunate omission is even more puzzling when we realize that humour and laughter are almost exclusively social activities. Laughing alone is certainly more suspect and less enjoyable than sharing humour with others. Martineau (1972) laments the lack of serious sociological

inquiry into humour since, "Humour is part of every social system...occurs in nearly every type of interaction...is intended to initiate social interaction and to keep the machinery of interaction operating smoothly and freely" (1972:103). Based on the premise that humour, as a means of communication between social actors and audiences, can improve our understanding of group structures and processes, Martineau then offers his own model of the social functions of humour.

In fact, most of the sociological work on humour has concentrated on the social functions of humour and laughter, and thus, comes from a functional perspective (see Zijderfeld, 1983). One of the main functions studied is social control. It was anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown (1949) who first discussed the pattern he termed the "joking relationship". In many cultures, joking is governed by explicit norms delineating who can make jokes and who will serve as targets. The targets are not permitted to take offence at these jokes, even though they contain a fair bit of hostility along with playfulness. Sociologists, intrigued by this phenomenon, began studying other ways in which humour serves as a method of social control. For instance, Burma (1964) concluded that racist humour in which Negroes were the butt of jokes made by Whites increased conflict by denigrating Blacks even further. Lafave (1961) used the concept of reference groups to illustrate how humour appreciation depends on whether one's own ethnic group is esteemed or disparaged in the context of the joke. Examining the impact of humour on social stratification, Stephenson concluded, "As a means of social control, humour may function to express approval or disapproval of social form and action, express common group sentiments, develop and perpetuate stereotypes..."(1951:574).

Not all theorists focus on humour strictly as social control. Some, such as Emerson (1963) and Blau (1955) have pointed out that humour can serve as a release of tension, diffusing antagonisms in potentially confrontative situations. Others, such as

Cheatwood (1983), concentrate on its playful nature, arguing that humour is a unique, highly enjoyable social activity which creates the distance necessary for reacting objectively to things outside ourselves. Making light of what we take so seriously, it allows us to put things in perspective in a more rational manner. Moreover, since it plays on the absurdity and incongruity of reality, it enables us to share old meanings and create new ones.

The common thread running through all these studies, even those in symbolic interactionism which examine humour's potential for negotiating meanings among groups and individuals, is an analysis based on the functions or purpose of humour. But what about the world of comics themselves? What are their perceptions about their role? How do they relate to their audiences, how do they perceive their status in society, to say nothing of their own standards? To my knowledge, sociology has virtually ignored the objective and subjective world in which the comic operates. To say that humour brings people together is no doubt valid, but where does one go with this knowledge? To claim humour exists because it is functional is, in effect, tautological.

Although there have been some sociological studies which focus specifically on comedians (most in the form of unpublished dissertations), none have focussed solely on female comics. This thesis, an ethnographic study of comediennes in Canada, is therefore, unique. Its concern is not with the functions of humour, but the perceptions and behaviour of women engaged in humour production.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

At its simplest level, comedy is an interactive process based on shared meaning. For instance, in reading a collection of essays by Woody Allen, we are able to laugh and appreciate the humourous content since it is based on a mutual understanding not only

of the English language but of human nature and the absurd situations in which we often find ourselves. However, because Woody Allen is with us as we read, the interaction is completely one-sided. We react to his words but he does not and cannot respond to our reactions.

What makes standup comedy so dynamic is the fluid, emotionally charged interaction between the performer and his or her audiences. Here laughter is not only a reaction but a gauge and a tool. For the comic it is a gauge of whether the symbols and meanings of her humour are appreciated by the audience. For the audience, it is a tool with which to communicate their pleasure or disapproval. But laughter is only one of a wide range of responses and scripts that are continuously being written during a comedy performance.

Clearly, standup comedy performing is best understood within a symbolic interactionist framework. This perspective is concerned with the social meanings individuals attach to experiences, situations and people in the world around them. Far from being static, meaning is constantly interpreted during the course of social interaction and this very interpretation determines subsequent behaviour (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984:9). Throughout a standup routine, both the performer and the audience are engaged in exchanging and interpreting symbols, words, gestures and reactions.

This concern with how meaning is generated and negotiated in social interaction necessitates a research design which is best able to capture these intricate processes. Therefore, symbolic interaction relies on qualitative research (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Having briefly outlined the underlying theoretical framework, consideration will now be given to the methodology employed in this thesis.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Throughout this ethnography, there were two interrelated central areas I wished to explore. The first was concerned specifically with the standup comedienne - her background, perceptions, doubts, goals and the problems she encounters in her chosen occupation. The second was concerned with a more in-depth examination of the comic at work, performing standup in front of an audience. Accordingly, a dual methodology was employed: interviewing and observation. Through the former I could learn how she carefully prepares and cultivates her performance as well as her approaches to and subsequent control of her audiences, and the various obstacles she faces as a comic and as a woman in a male-dominated field. Through the latter, in observations at comedy clubs, I could actually witness her overall presentation and audience interaction - observing how even the finished product is subject to interpretation and change.

As an observer, I participated only in the sense of being an audience member- laughing and applauding. For obvious reasons, I did not call out suggestions, heckle, volunteer information or otherwise interrupt the show in any way.

The bulk of my observational research was conducted at comedy venues in Southern Ontario, and to a lesser extent, Montreal. In all, I observed eighteen comedy performances. From May - September 1987, I attended ten shows, five at comedy clubs in Ontario, the remaining five at Montreal's international Just For Laughs Comedy Festival. I also drew heavily on field notes taken during the observation of eight shows the previous year for a graduate course in qualitative methodology.

The temptation to laugh and lose myself in the shows, though often strong, was overridden by my intent to investigate the interactive process of standup comedy. Since the comic-audience dynamic was a key factor in my observations and subsequent analysis of what performing standup involves, I noted when the audience applauded

and when they did not; when they laughed heartily, when they merely chuckled, when they groaned and worst of all (from the comic's standpoint), when they were silent. How responsive was the audience in general? Did it take the emcee several minutes to warm them up or were they filled with enthusiasm the moment the stage lights went on? Was their response consistent throughout the show or did it differ for each comedian? I paid careful attention to disruptions: what happened when someone heckled? How did the rest of the audience react? How quick was the comic to respond and how exactly, did he or she handle the interruption? When it continued, who won this battle for control? Did the audience take sides and if so, who was favoured? Were there other disruptions and again, how were they dealt with by the comic? All of this was affected by the type of venue and the gender, status and presentation style of the comic. Since success as a comic depends, to a great extent, on imprinting one's unique vision of the world on others and getting them to laugh in the process, I also noted the style of each performer. For instance, did she come on strong or more softly? Was she a joke machine - setup/punchline in quick succession - or a story-teller where the humour evolved out of the situation and/or character? How did she interact with individuals in the audience, if at all? Did she have a gimmick or even something as simple as a catch phrase? Did she use props and/or outlandish costumes?

Another key part of the analysis involved taking detailed notes on their material and the angle or perspective brought to the subjects that were joked about the most. I also noted the absence, presence and degree of expletives and what is known in the trade alternately as "toilet humour" and "dick jokes" (scatological humour).

ACCESS TO COMEDIENNES

Attending the shows served a practical purpose as well, for it was at the clubs that I made most of my contacts. I had seen all but four of the sixteen women I eventually interviewed perform. (These exceptions were referred to me by other performers and at the time of my research, were involved in activities other than standup). While observing at clubs and other venues, I deliberately sat either at the back of the club where the comics watched the show, or near the backstage entrance so that I could approach them when they came off stage. In my initial explanation, I told them I was a student writing a thesis on women in comedy and would like very much to interview them at their convenience. I wound up approaching twenty women, four of whom refused me - three at the festival simply had no time and one in Toronto failed to show up for the interview or return my calls. Most of the women I met face to face were more than happy to accommodate me and some seemed genuinely flattered by my request. All were quite open and honest once assured by me of complete confidentiality and anonymity. All but two of the sixteen interviews conducted took place from May-September 1987. All interviews were conducted in Southern Ontario and Montreal. The majority turned out to be in-depth interviews, lasting anywhere from 45 minutes to three hours. Five interviews were considerably shorter, 10-25 minutes each, primarily due to time constraints. These were done at the actual performance venue, between the first and second shows of the evening, or as hastily arranged last minute chats.

Although this thesis focuses specifically on women working in standup, I briefly interviewed four male comics, mainly about their experiences with managers and fellow comics. Moreover, the observation sessions yielded much information about the styles, routines and approaches of male comics, who comprise the vast majority of standup comedians.

THE INTERVIEW SAMPLE

Wanting to talk to as many comediennes as possible and taking into consideration the miniscule number of female standups in Canada, I also spoke to three actresses. Although they do straight dramatic roles, these actresses prefer comedy, especially improvisation. The other thirteen women interviewed confined themselves mostly to standup. Aside from two who disavow mainstream humour and work for community based audiences who appreciate their feminist orientation, the comediennes working in Canada are either employed by specific comedy clubs where they are ranked and paid accordingly, or they work as independents, trying to perform wherever they can (not necessarily limiting themselves to clubs). At the lowest end of the scale is the amateur who is not paid but gets the chance to perfect her technique by working on stage in front of an audience. Two of the comics were amateurs at the time of the interviews. Turning to those with professional status, one of the comics interviewed is an opening act and three are middle acts. The remaining half are headliners or features, the act whom most people come to see and whose name is displayed in bold lettering on the marquee.

In terms of age, education, nationality, ethnicity and marital status, they turned out to be a surprisingly homogeneous group. Only one of the sixteen women interviewed is or has ever been married. Fourteen continued their post-secondary education, most of them receiving Bachelor's degrees, having majored in Theatre Arts. Only two stopped their education after high school and none were dropouts. Most of the women are Canadian born, currently living in Central Canada. Three are American and one is Australian. The literature on comedians often points out that a substantial number are Jewish. This was not the case for my sample, where only two of the women interviewed are Jewish. Blacks, Orientals and Lebanese are represented by one

woman in each of these groups. The majority, two-thirds of the sample, are white Anglo Saxons. As for the age range, only four of these women are in their early thirties. The remaining dozen are between 23-29, with most concentrated in the mid-twenties.

Concerning the representativeness of the sample, the following observations should be made. To begin with, in improvisational troupes, virtually all of the players, male and female, are young. Perhaps the nature of improvising - fast, frantic, requiring lots of energy, is best suited to younger actors. The club situation is different. Here in Canada, every comedienne interviewed does not intend to remain in the club circuit. Precisely because they are at the beginning of their careers, they are using their experiences and skills as a valuable training ground to get exposure, perfect their craft and then go on to more lucrative acting jobs in television and film. Seen within this context, the small age range begins to make sense. A similar rationale can be applied to the education variable. A large percentage of these women came to standup comedy from their theatrical training with the realization that even in the performing arts, a university degree is a definite asset. As for the question of marital status, even male comics marry at a later age than the average male. This has to do with the unique circumstances they face. Standup comics spend an inordinate part of their early career on the road, travelling to and from jobs across the country. It is a lifestyle which is not conducive to a long term relationship, let alone children. However, as indicated by the literature, comediennes are less likely to marry and have children and more likely to divorce than their male colleagues. A number of reasons are advanced to explain this. One has to do with jealousy men feel over women's success. Another concerns the geographic mobility factor taking a woman away from her husband and children, a practice frowned upon by a society which assumes the family is primarily a woman's

responsibility (see Martin and Segrave, 1986; Janus et al. 1978 for a discussion of these issues).

THE INTERVIEWS

Most of the interviews took place in the privacy and comfort of the women's homes in what turned out to be relaxing atmospheres. The interviews themselves were unstructured, nonstandardized and open-ended. In this way, I hoped to elicit their personal recollections and experiences in their own words, to have them determine what is and is not important. As Taylor and Bogdan (1984) point out, asking directive questions is similar to leading the witness in the courtroom - the researcher, by asking questions on specific issues, may inadvertently convince the respondent that these are the only issues worth discussing. The alternative then, is to ask questions which lead to descriptive answers (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984:93).

Unstructured interviewing need not, however, result in uncontrolled rambling. While my interviews lacked a formality in questioning and tone, I came to each interview guided by a written list of topics under the heading "things to be sure to ask". This list included career development (initial interest to present position to future goals), audience interaction and control (establishing rapport, awareness of response, heckling), material and ideology (putting together a routine, perspectives), style (timing, presentation, gimmicks), and being a woman in comedy (relations with management and fellow comics, obstacles related to gender). I was not concerned with the order in which these issues were covered but if, by the end of the interview, some of these topics had not been addressed at all, I raised them.

The advantages of such an approach became clear to me when respondents, in describing their experiences, would discuss problems or issues which I had no idea

existed (i.e. the "dyke" myth). Thus, many of the interviewees themselves were partially responsible for helping me formulate new areas to explore.

BIASES AND PROBLEMS

Throughout the interviews, my main concern was with putting the respondents at ease. I tried to relate to them not merely as subjects or even comediennes, but as people with feelings, insights and a wealth of experiences from which they had no doubt learned valuable lessons. As a result of my approach, the interviews were like guided conversations. Treating people with sensitivity is fundamental to the qualitative approach. Taylor and Bogdan describe the ideal interview as "relaxed and conversational, since this is how people normally interact. The interviewer relates to informants on a personal level " (1984:93).

Initially, I tried to establish this personal connection by explaining my interest and previous involvement in standup comedy. Because I had been on stage before, because I had tasted, however briefly, what it is like to perform standup comedy in front of an audience, what it is like to interact with other aspiring comics, male and female, I had, in a sense, an insider's view. The comediennes probably sensed that I would not just record but also understand what they meant, that their experiences would not strike me as abnormal, that I would not think they were somehow "off-the-wall". Empathy and identification were of paramount importance in conducting these interviews.

In essence, I was combining a strong feminist orientation which stresses being woman-centered and understanding with what Taylor and Bogdan (1984) term the humanistic focus of qualitative methods. They note:

> When we study people qualitatively, we get to know them personally...We learn about concepts such as beauty, pain, faith, suffering, frustration and love whose essence is lost through other research approaches (1984:7).

Critics of the qualitative approach are quick to point out that such closeness brings with it the danger of "going native" - identifying so completely with respondents that researcher objectivity is lost. Addressing this issue of bias, Becker suggests that at best, the researcher must be sure to identify his or her biases at the outset:

> We take sides as our personal and political commitments dictate, use our theoretical and technical resources to avoid the distortions they might introduce into our work, limit our conclusions carefully, recognize the hierarchy of credibility for what it is, and field as best we can the accusations and doubts that will surely be our fate (Becker, 1967:239-247).

Admittedly, the perspective brought to this study was potentially problematic. My interest in female comics arose from a woman-centered, feminist orientation. To the question of resulting bias, I can only reply that no researcher is ever completely neutral. On the contrary, bias is present in the very topics one chooses to investigate. Thus, I maintain that while my orientation served as a focus for this study, it did not blind me to the contradictions brought up by the interviewees and observed in the field. Throughout this thesis, I have endeavoured to point out the exceptions to general patterns discovered.

I came to this research with the assumption that, as is generally the case when women enter non-traditional fields, comediennes do experience sexism. Believing it was crucial to be honest and open with the respondents, I began each interview by explaining that my primary interest lay in examining specific problems female comics face because they are women. Thus, I asked explicitly, "What problems do you face as a woman comic?" However, most interviews rarely began with this question. At first, I asked the interviewees to describe their initial interest and involvement with

comedy. Moreover, although my personal orientation was decidedly feminist, I did not use the interviews as a forum for my own political views. Finally, no more than one third of most interviews were devoted to problems faced by women in comedy. A great deal of their comments centered around the history of their involvement in theatre and standup, their doubts, difficulties, triumphs, and all the elements which go into the making of a successful comic.

In a critique of what she describes as the traditional hierarchical interviewer as dominant model, Oakley (1981) explains:

> A feminist interviewing women is by definition both inside the culture and participating in that which she is observing (1981:57).

Thus, some bias is an unavoidable side effect of personal involvement and understanding between the female researcher and her interviewees. Yet, it cannot be otherwise in conducting women-centered research.

CONCLUSION

As Taylor and Bogdan point out:

> Qualitative researchers try to understand people from their own frame of reference...experiencing reality as others experience it...[they] empathize and identify with the people they study in order to understand how they see things (1984:6).

This, then, is the type of research I undertook, with a considerable degree of enthusiasm. I wanted to address a subject which is rarely discussed, to say nothing of considered worthy of serious inquiry. The literature on comedy in general has committed a grave disservice to women by virtually ignoring their accomplishments. It is precisely because women have traditionally been silenced that the primary goal of this

thesis is to allow female standup comics to tell their stories in their own voices. Throughout the research process and subsequent analysis, I have tried to represent them as fairly as possible. It is unfortunate that in the process of transferring pieces of someone's life into categories, part of her individuality may get lost. As Corbin writes of her respondents, "I hope they will appreciate that it is only the data that have been manipulated and not they themselves" (1971:306).

Chapter 3: THE COMEDY FIELD: IT'S A MAN'S WORLD

INTRODUCTION

Performing artists seem to share the fantasy of being able to explore their creativity before a sympathetic, adoring public. Noticeably absent from this vision are agents, managers and club owners. Standup comedy is a business and those who work in the field often find themselves constrained by its rules and limitations. Like many male dominated fields, the world of standup comedy can be a particularly harsh place for its female employees.

Comediennes operate in a specific context which has its own structure, one which was conceived and perpetuated by male thought and action. Hence, to make sense of comediennes' experiences (primarily in this country), an overview of the standup comedy environment will be given. As we shall see, the Canadian club scene differs considerably from its American counterpart, both in its operation and sheer volume. Due to its prominent position and stature, the analysis of comedy in Canada will focus mainly on Yuk Yuk's. From here we will move on to a more in-depth examination of how comedy, specifically in its structure and terminology, has always been male defined. When we move from the abstract (language and structure) to the concrete (relationships between men and women working in comedy), we will see how a system whose very structure excludes women exhibits a great deal of ambivalence towards those women who have infiltrated its ranks.

Consisting of a mostly male hierarchy, management's lack of support for comediennes is matched by resentment, jealousy and anger on the part of male comics. It will become apparent how discrimination and sexism, sometimes subtle, other times overt and hostile, are built into the professional world of standup comedy. Finally, we conclude by exploring how comediennes feel marginalized and isolated.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to take the reader backstage, beyond the

laughter to the daily grind and working conditions in comedy clubs. Through this closer look at the working environment of comediennes, we will begin to see the link between the aggressive world of standup comedy and the inability of those who operate within this medium to accept women as equals.

THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

Books like Women In Comedy (1986) and The Joke's On Us(1987), pay tribute to the colourful history of women's participation in comedy in the United States and Britain respectively. Similar tributes to Canadian comics, male and female, although possible, would result in a pamphlet rather than a book. To be quite blunt, there is no history of comedy per se in Canada. This fact is intimately related to the low profile of entertainment in this country. Even today, it remains true that Canadian entertainers must often go south of the border in search of fame and broader performing opportunities. In the words of a pro comic, originally from Vancouver (male):

> The entertainment business in Canada is a skeleton, just the bones are there. You don't have flesh all around it. It's not a monster...you're not gonna make as much as a comedian in Canada as you could in the States.

If the above is true of entertainment in general, it is even more applicable to the club scene. The current popularity of standup comedy is a historical anomaly. As recently as fifteen years ago, performers wishing to try their hands at standup literally had no place to do so. This situation has changed drastically. An agent interviewed said:

> I think right now, at this time, comedy is probably the hottest it's ever been in Canada. This type of comedy. Club comedy.

Still, there are a number of misconceptions, the most common being the equation of comedy club with Yuk Yuk's. While it is the best known chain of clubs in

Canada, it is definitely not the only standup outfit in town. Aside from Yuk Yuk's, the Canadian comedy club scene can be split into two categories: clubs where only comedy is performed, and other types of clubs and venues which offer occasional (but consistent) comedy nights. Bonafide comedy clubs include the Comedy Corner in Windsor, Punchlines in Vancouver (with a new one opening soon in Toronto), Arbuckle's in Toronto and two Comedy Nests in Montreal. Then there are a variety of clubs/bars in big cities and smaller towns which offer weekly, bi-monthly or monthly comedy nights. In addition to club work, comics perform at venues ranging from the university/college circuit to stags, conventions and business conferences. In general, the high profile of comedy has made it a viable commodity and the comic may find his or her services in demand not just at clubs but at other organizations as well. However, there is a catch, one which puts Canada in a unique, if not unflattering position on the comedy map. Yuk Yuk's, as the grandfather of standup clubs, enforces a strict policy demanding exclusivity of its employees - in a word: blacklisting. Thus, if a comic under contract at Yuk Yuk's decides, for whatever reason, to do a gig at another club without management's permission, he or she is banned from working in any of Yuk Yuk's clubs. Permission, moreover, is granted to a chosen few. Aside from the great anguish and resentment caused by this and other restrictions, this situation also has profound implications for standup comedy as an industry. An agent describes the frustrations and limitations such a policy has on business:

> Unfortunately in Canada there are some strange politics going on and because of these politics the comics do not have access [to all clubs]. They have to make a choice: they either work for the Yuk Yuk's chain or they work for the independents. Unfortunately, that is the situation. It's not the way I'd like it to be, I don't feel it has to be that way...A lot of talented standups can't work for me because of the politics.

From a purely artistic standpoint, penalizing a performer for going out and

performing seems to make little, if any, sense. Certainly, the situation is radically different in the United States. A pro comic who worked in San Francisco for a while talked about what a refreshing experience this was:

> I went to San Francisco with my suitcase and my guitar, climbing up those hills, signed up for the amateur night in one club, I killed, they put me on feature and they called the two other clubs. You see how different it is there than here...They said,'She's really great, put her on.' I played three clubs.

Given that Yuk Yuk's has thirteen clubs across the country, why should some comics care about the exclusivity clause? First, there is understandable resentment of any attempt to control the direction of their careers by dictating where they can and cannot play. Secondly, because favouritism is rampant, some comics play more gigs more frequently while others barely make enough money to survive. Finally, like all performers, comedians need exposure, the chance to perform as often and in as many venues as possible. This exposure serves two important purposes: it gives them a higher profile which is often a ticket to other gigs, and it enables them to perfect their craft. Unlike musicians or painters who practice and work in their attics, privately, until the finished product is deemed of high enough quality for public consumption, a comic must practice in front of an audience. This is the only way she can learn the skills and tricks of the trade. It is one thing to believe a joke is funny, quite another to hear the silence of an audience who clearly disagrees.

Even at the best of times, restrictions on creativity cause problems. However, comics who are sympathetic to the necessity of doing business and making a profit can understand management's viewpoint. As one pro says:

> Management is the business side of it and we are the art side of it and the two don't particularly mesh very well. So if you do things that are a little risky or a little controversial, you will be reprimanded, there is no doubt about that.

While reprimands are one thing, out and out blacklisting is a completely different story. A veteran pro who is coming back to the comedy scene after an absence in which she had numerous acting jobs describes the sharp contrast between her current situation and the days when she performed occasionally for Yuk Yuk's:

> I'm beginning to work out again with independent bookers as a standup, three of them as of today, they're all three different booking agents and none of them care if I go with this person, this person or this person. Because I have to live.
>
> I never signed with them [Yuk Yuk's]. I just said, 'If you want my talent, you call me, I'll play your club...but you can't tell me where I can play.' And they let me go on like that for a long time. But then the rules started getting really strict and they started getting these really young comics in who would do anything they say...All of a sudden he [the owner] goes, 'You're a bad influence on the younger comics, they're starting to think that they can do it too. So I am kicking you out as of now.'...Ever since they threw me out, my career zoomed.

Those comedians, who found themselves sufficiently outraged by Yuk Yuk's attempt to create something close to a comedy monopoly, left the organization. They claim their careers have blossomed, primarily because they now have the freedom to play whichever clubs desire their services. The end result is greater exposure commensurate with salary increases.

Comics at Yuk Yuk's who seem reticent to "tow the party line", so to speak, are indoctrinated through fear into believing that if they do not work Yuk Yuk's, there is no comedy circuit to work. Clearly, this is erroneous, yet, fear seems to be a successful strategy. Other problems include attempts by management to dictate with whom comics should or should not associate, and the limited opportunities for advancement within the organization due to favouritism. The following comments from three veteran male comics illustrate some of these problems:

> There have been a number of guys who stepped out of the Yuk Yuk's organization and tried to work the other circuits, but if it wasn't for

> Yuk Yuk's, they would have no place to play...There's one guy that went back and just continually said, 'No, there's no work on the circuit outside,' and sure enough, he stands up at meetings and says, 'You can't make a living outside Yuk Yuk's, all the places you work are hell-holes and so everybody sits there and goes, 'Ooh, we better not leave.'
>
> The pecking order, when a lot of us went through there, it's the top guy who'd always get the gigs...What's the use? I mean, there are a lot of M.B.A.s here and they probably wouldn't go to a company where the chief executive officer is thirty years old. Where do you go? By the time this guy retires you're ready to retire and you're never gonna get the top chair.
>
> They get the younger comics. A younger comic doesn't realize that an agent who has thirty acts, the agent doesn't care who they book. They don't care as long as they book somebody. That's not what you want. You need someone that's gonna book you...We don't work for the agent, the agent works for us. And it's the other way around at Yuk Yuk's.

Most of the interviews for this study were conducted with comics who have either left the organization or intend to branch out eventually. They firmly believe that any comic with talent , flexibility and the skill to perform before different types of audiences will find success "on the outside". Conversely, (in their assessment) those who do not succeed were not talented enough or flexible enough to begin with and would surely flounder, for instance, in the United States comedy market. (It may very well be that those who remain with the club enjoy the security a steady position and income provides, and are satisfied with management.)

In any case, the picture which emerges is of an organization which practices favouritism and blacklisting while giving comics an incomplete, distorted view of performing opportunities in Canada. Theoretically, as an agency, Yuk Yuk's should be working for its clients' (the comics) best interests. Moreover, these somewhat rigid policies have a profound impact on comedians: their self-perceptions, goals and current levels of job satisfaction. In addition, as in any other organization, its policies and attitudes create an atmosphere which permeates all facets of life within that

organization. Thus, favouritism and the constant threat of blacklisting have implications for interaction between comics, an interaction which has different consequences for male and female comics. With this in mind, let us now turn to the problems females, as a minority, encounter.

COMEDY: A MAN'S WORLD

Comedy, as an industry and an artistic craft, has always been run by men. As such, its very structure has been male defined. Far from being restricted to comedy, this is applicable to all facets of entertainment. Consider the similarity in the following quotes, the first from an improviser/actress and the others from standup comics:

> The theatre is a man's world. Unless it's a play especially about women, the majority of roles are men. And chances are, nine times out of ten, the lead character is a man.
>
> It's a man's stage. If you go out there you know full well what's awaiting you. So you gotta be tough.
>
> It's a territorial thing...Women aren't supposed to be here...It's like hunting, it's like, a man's thing.
>
> It's a male dominated field. And the boys club doesn't wanna let the girls in.

More often than not, the "girls" do not even consider comedy as an option, precisely because it is such a male dominated field. As we shall see in a later chapter, at first very few women seriously entertain the suggestion that they become standup comics. For many it is too risky and frightening. For others, the idea is simply absurd. Sociologically, this is explained by the process of anticipatory socialization. One chooses a career or occupation for a variety of reasons, taking into account one's interests, skills, goals and desires. However, before one even considers the possibility of entering a specific occupation, one must be able to imagine oneself

fitting into that particular world. In this "rehearsal for the future" (Mackie, 1983:62), while trying to visualize oneself in it, one learns the attitudes and behaviours of the anticipated role. Herein lies the first obstacle when dealing with comedy: it is virtually impossible for women to visualize themselves in the role of a standup comic because when they close their eyes they are likely to see a Don Rickles clone insulting the audience or a Henny Youngman spitting out one-liners about his wife. An American pro admits:

> Even I thought that. Because when I thought of standup comics I thought of the guy with the necktie in the Catskills who [raspy voice] 'talks like this.'

It should be noted that these images occur to women who had taken theatre and been involved in other aspects of the performing arts. If part of this popular image involves a man in a suit, the other half involves standup as risky, slightly uncomfortable and at times, downright nasty. Standup comedy has a hard-edged aggressive quality. For the duration of their performance, comics have the attention of a room filled with people and the license to say whatever they wish to whomever they wish. While it is not necessary for comics to insult their audiences, and indeed, many refuse to, the power to do so remains present. It is the comic who speaks into the microphone, who commands attention, who demands to be heard. In short, comedy is a potentially powerful medium. And our society still has a great deal of trouble accepting women who are aggressive (Doyle, 1985). In the next chapter, we shall see just how much effort female comics must devote to tone down their aggressiveness so as not to threaten and turn off their audiences.

COMEDY AS MALE DEFINED

For the most part, the comics interviewed for this study worked within the typical structure of standup routines. There are, of course, countless variations, but the basic format, what can be referred to as "setup/punchline", remains popular. Most routines are composed of a set of jokes on a variety of topics linked together by segues (or bridges) into a relatively coherent whole. Laughter is often interspersed throughout the routine but the biggest laughs follow a joke's punchline. This is the line that either inverts the previous supposition, coming as a total surprise, or delights in its absurdity, often catching the listener off guard. Everything preceding the punchline, what is called a setup, in effect, sets the stage, outlining the premise or situation.

It is my contention that not only has this very format been male defined, but so too is the language, or standup comedy argot. The question is, does this really make a difference? According to linguistic theorists (and sociologists) language, in assuming and expressing an already given set of values and attitudes, is intimately connected to thought and social life. Moreover, feminists have convincingly illustrated how language is gendered:

> Language is our means of classifying and ordering the world: our means of manipulating reality...One semantic rule which we can see in operation in the language is that of the male-as-norm...At the most basic level of meaning the status of female is derived from the status of the male and on this has been erected many strata of positive and negative classifications (Spender, 1980:2-3).

> Language and the general patterns of its use can be taken as an index of culturally shared or predominant attitudes and values connected with women and men, with sexuality and with the sexual distribution of social roles and statuses (McConnel-Ginet, 1980:5).

In the English language, words and their meanings reflect men's rather than women's experiences, activities and perceptions (Kramarae, 1980:60).

Applying this analysis to comedy involves an examination of its terminology. Consider the word "punchline". While the setup lulls the audience into a false sense of security, the punchline literally hits them over the head, shattering this illusion. Standup jargon is replete with equally violent imagery. Comics prove they are in control by "slamming" hecklers. Comedians who recall successful performances boast proudly, "I killed." When their performances are met with blank stares, yawns and complete silence, they moan, "I died," and subsequently refer to these failures as "bombs". Thus, the vocabulary used to describe their craft is taken straight out of war terminology, conjuring up images of standup as a battle between the performer, who must gain the upper hand, and audiences, who must be controlled and conquered.

It remains true that on the whole, women are not raised to be infantrymen, let alone generals. Perhaps this is why some of them have difficulty accepting the label of "standup comedian". This is particularly true of those comediennes who shun typical mainstream humour, appearing not in comedy clubs but other venues, usually before audiences who share their political and ideological orientations. They have an entirely different conception of humour in which concepts such as power and aggression are foreign. Humour becomes a matter of shared experiences, doubts and revelations; about community rather than adversity. Two comic performers interviewed explain how they see their humour:

> I refuse to refer to myself as a standup comedian. Because I don't feel like I'm representing comedy as much as I want to represent the humour that is intrinsic in all women. And not all women. But there are so many fucking things that we never talk about...We don't open our mouths to say we're in pain. And the same thing, we don't open our mouths and make that same pain humour.
>
> I think feminist humour is different in that feminism tries to deal with a lot of things like racism, political activism and misogyny. So the humour would be less apt to degrade other people. And a lot of humour is based on making other people look bad: 'the Portuguese', 'my wife'...

Those women who insist comedy need not be aggressive to be effective are, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, in the process of negotiating the meaning of humour. Part of changing this definition involves reinterpreting the customary symbolic order in which humour operates. This process is not limited to North America, as the following assertion from a British comedienne makes clear:

> Standup can be gentle, non-confrontational and warmly appreciated (Banks and Swift, 1987:141).

The redefinition of humour covers the entire spectrum of performing. A few of the women interviewed who work in mainstream comedy insisted that their humour does not and cannot fit into the setup/punchline mold. Like the more ideologically oriented comediennes, their explanations for this decision hinge on their conception of humour as shared experience rather than attacks. Consider the following comments:

> I don't have any great lines...Every now and then the line is good and appropriate to the moment, but I don't have any pat lines, only descriptive story-telling.
>
> Much as I can be filthy on stage when I have to, I stay away from that stuff. I do observations, stories, etc., very rarely line/line/joke.
>
> I tend to do a lot of characters, again, which is really left field, and I incorporate soliloquies in my standup. It's just so diverse.

For all the women who are redefining standup comedy for themselves, there are just as many who retain the setup/punchline format, again, because they feel comfortable with it. However, audiences do not always accept those who choose to be different. During my participant observation sessions at comedy clubs and other venues, many audiences were bewildered by comics who, refusing to fit into a typical format, did not deliver setup/punchline in quick succession. The following observation from my fieldnotes illustrates how ingrained we are, as audiences, to view only certain types of humour as genuinely funny or appropriate:

> While there was laughter throughout her twenty-five minute routine, the audience was clearly baffled by J. Her entire approach to standup comedy was unlike any of the others who took part in the English language section of the festival. She practiced what one of my instructors had advised: take it as far into the twilight zone as you can because everything's been done before. However, in this case, the audience was incapable of following her that far.

MANAGEMENT AND LACK OF SUPPORT FOR WOMEN

As outlined in chapter 1, the general picture for women in comedy is brighter than it has ever been. Whereas twenty years ago, lone women like Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller found they had to resort to self-deprecation in order to survive (and be seen as non-threatening), this is not the case today. Women comic performers offer a sweeping panorama of styles and images from the cynicism of Roseanne Barr to the honest vulnerability of Lily Tomlin to the wacky zaniness of Andrea Martin. Women today are being booked as feature acts in comedy clubs. These brighter prospects, as opposed to twenty years ago, are a reflection of the position of women in society. As women advance into non-traditional fields, so too have they ventured, in greater numbers, into standup comedy. The following quotes, the first from a pro about the blatant sexism she encountered from management when she first started performing, and the second from an agent about the current demand for female comics, are indicative of the changes in attitudes which have taken place over the last decade:

> There was a lot of it [discrimination]. And still is. Many times I would call up club owners and they would say they wouldn't even consider me for a job because they don't like to hire women comics. And I said, 'Why?' And they said, 'Because they don't draw crowds.' I said, 'Women comics or women in general?' 'Women in general.' I said, 'Well, have you heard of Barbra Streisand? She just did the biggest outdoor concert in history.'
>
> Some club owners are asking specifically for female acts because they're a novelty. Which, in a way, is just as sexist.

Despite their increasing numbers, women remain a minority on the comedy club circuit. Many comediennes believe management does not give them nearly enough support. (This sentiment was echoed by an American comic as well.) Complaints range from the fact that management is not giving them enough support to a refusal to consider them for more prestigious gigs. The following quotes, two from Canadians and one from an American, express their dissatisfaction and frustration with management:

> I had a few waiters and other comics tell me that people are starting to ask for me so I am getting a following, but the management will be damned if they admit that I'm doing a good job...They don't wanna push me ahead for some reason. They're not promoting me like I think they should be promoting me. 'Cause I've been jerked around a lot, God knows.
>
> [Management] wouldn't even showcase me. They didn't want me to do it 'cause they didn't think I was funny. And so I called the producers and said, 'I want a showcase, I wanna audition,' and they said O.K. So I went to --- and did it on my own...I bypassed [management] completely because they wouldn't give me a showcase.
>
> I think it [being a woman] makes a difference to the club owners. One of the reasons I stopped performing at The Improv was because I thought the owner was not pushing me and she was pushing men who had been there less time than I was and who were not as good as I was.

Another issue discussed by comediennes is one faced by women in other non-traditional fields: tokenism. An example of this was evident in the creation of All Women's Week, in which only female comics performed at the club. Reactions to this event from female comics were less than favourable:

> I'm happy there are enough women in it to have our own show. But why call it "a funny female show"? Why not call it "a fine night of comedy"?
>
> It will be very, very unlikely if I will ever do another women's show. Just because of the fact that they are making too big a deal of women in comedy. When I perform I don't want to be seen as a woman - that is my biggest beef. I want to be seen as a comic...See, I'm just

> striving for that equality. And when you do something like this, make it a big thing, then you're putting it on a pedestal. Just don't exalt it for God's sake!

Before such reactions are dismissed as irrational, it is helpful to examine the basis of the anger felt by these comics. A common by-product of tokenism is the assumption that one was not hired on the basis of talent alone. Women are a distinct minority on the Canadian standup circuit. In terms of publicity, having an All Women's Week may effectively hide that fact. Moreover, comediennes complain that in setting them apart, management sabotages their efforts to be viewed and treated as comics, professional performers first and foremost. There is, for instance, no All Negro Week or All Jewish Week to focus on the existence of ethnic minorities in standup comedy.

In the previous section, we saw how it is the male definition of humour which is taken as the norm and against which women are measured. Indeed, one of the pros interviewed is convinced her difficulties with management stem partly from her unwillingness to fit into the typical mold. Here we must make an important point: it is not just audiences which have trouble accepting new comedy formats. Deviations from the setup/punchline framework are frowned upon by management as well. In fact, to rank comics and measure their popularity, Yuk Yuk's uses a laugh ratio. Moreover, comics who refuse to do toilet humour are penalized as well. One comic explains:

> Because I won't do that kind of humour and when the audience doesn't accept that and they're not laughing at it, well then, to the booking staff it's a sign that I failed. When in fact I haven't.
>
> They say I don't have enough of a laugh ratio factor, which is supposed to be 15-20 seconds but that's if you're doing line/punchline;line/punchline.

In virtually all aspects of the comedy field, women have a more difficult time being accepted as funny by a mostly male management hierarchy. In radio, television

and film, men are the program directors and producers who decide what is or is not a worthwhile project. The following quote from Lynne Roth, director of comedy development at 20th Century Fox, is a common complaint voiced by women who work in the comedy field:

> Men are still in control and they still don't know what to do with us (Collier and Beckett, 1980:146).

This pattern is not restricted to North America.In The Joke's On Us, Britain's female comic performers talk about working in a male controlled environment. Some offer their own personal definitions of male and female styles of humour:

> Humour is like an orgasm and male humour is like a male orgasm-bang, bang, punchline - everything's very jerky. Whereas female humour is much more cumulative -it goes on and on and you may get a laugh at the end or you may not (Banks and Swift, 1987:181).
>
> It struck me that perhaps the myth of women being not as funny as men was due to the fact that they were just trying to imitate a style more suited to men than women (ibid:202).

Since men have been in control of the cultural production of comedy, it follows that the very conception of what is humourous and what is not has been defined by men. For instance, a popular style of standup comedy, "putdown humour", can be aggressive to the point of thinly disguised hostility. Don Rickles and comics who continually goad and insult their audiences represent the extreme of this format. Yet, putdown humour, especially in relation to audience members, is fairly common in comedy clubs. In fact, many comics begin their routines by insulting individual audience members. (While we will examine this process in a chapter on comedian /audience interaction, for now we are concerned with the masculine format of comedy.) A substantial number of female comics interviewed expressed, rather vehemently, their dislike of putdown, antagonistic humour:

> Why antagonize someone who doesn't know if she likes me yet? But right away I'm picking on her...It's not her I'm worried about but people who think, 'It's easy to pick on someone and get a laugh. Where's the funny, where's the clever stuff?'
>
> I'm very non-confrontative when it comes to aggression...Rather than going 'WHOP'[punches] to the audience, I go, 'Hi. You want me? 'Cause I kinda want to be wanted.'
>
> I think really that women's humour often tends to be more anecdotal and quieter and humble...

This is not to suggest that all women believe there is a distinction between male and female styles of humour, nor that women who feel more comfortable delivering setup/punchline in quick succession are "selling out". Rather, the point is this: for the most part, management is reluctant to accept deviations from the traditional aggressive format. Since they are not open to alternatives, women who challenge this norm face even greater discrimination in the comedy field and are not seen as funny.

It must be emphasized that all the comediennes interviewed had encountered, at some point in their careers, sexism, a prejudice based upon society's (mis)conception of what is proper and improper behaviour for women. (This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.) The two comics quoted below contrast their earlier naivete as to the prevalence of these deeply rooted prejudices with their later disillusionment:

> When I started out I thought if you're funny it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter whether you're a man or a woman. Bullshit!
>
> I was really upset about the fact that this [sexism] was happening to me...that I was living in a sexist society. I think it's one of the first times that I actually banged up against prejudice. And that really shocked me.

Thus, even women who are bonafide comediennes are still seen as an oddity, a novelty, not quite belonging. While comediennes are far from satisfied with management's attitudes, they are equally troubled and outraged by the reactionary attitudes of

fellow comics. In this next section, we shall examine the uneasy relationship between female comics and their male colleagues.

MALE COLLEAGUES: RESENTMENT, JEALOUSY AND SEXIST INTROS

One of the most shocking revelations to come out of my interviews was the depth of the fear, anger and resentment male comics displayed towards women as fellow performers. Over and over again, the women interviewed related, sometimes matter-of-factly, other times with understandable bitterness, the sexist ways in which they are treated by male comics who act as emcees. Their protests have so far fallen on deaf ears as they continue to be introduced in the following way:

> One of the standard introductions for women in comedy is, 'There's not a lot of women in comedy...a lot of sluts and whores, but not a lot of women.'
>
> He introduced us [two women] as each others' lovers. Now it wasn't bad enough that they hate us as women because in his introduction he introduces us as, 'There's not a lot of women in show business - a lot of sluts...'
>
> You see the way I'm introduced; 'The funniest female comic.' I'm another species. I'm not the premier comic in Canada, I'm the premier female comic, which is so stupid.

Calling attention to the fact that she is a woman is bad enough, for it distracts the audience away from what should be the central fact - that on that stage she is a comic, not a woman; a performer rather than a gender. To further imply that she is a slut is a slap in the face. One can hardly imagine an emcee introducing Richard Pryor as "the best nigger comic" or Woody Allen as "everyone's favourite kike." Audiences would be outraged. Yet when women are introduced in such a derogatory fashion, nary a peep can be heard.

All of the comediennes interviewed had clearly told these emcees in no uncertain terms, that they will not tolerate such offensive, demeaning introductions. It seems, however, that their protests are to no avail. This issue is crucial because the introduction which precedes the comic's appearance on stage, sets the tone for how the audience will perceive her. If she is perceived as a sexually loose woman, the audience may be paying more attention to how she looks as opposed to what she is saying. Thus, these "intros" can be viewed as an attempt to ruin her credibility as a comic by focusing on her supposed immorality as a woman. It is an added hurdle which she does not need, an extra barrier to be overcome before getting the audience on her side. Comics resent both these introductions and the inability of males to take their protests seriously:

> You know, the intro is just as important as the rest of it. Don't even use the word 'woman' in the setup.
>
> I told him [emcee, after a sexist intro], 'Please don't ever do that again.' He says, 'It's funny.' I said, 'It's not funny. Do you introduce two men as that?'
>
> I got introduced by L. saying I slept with all the guys backstage. I didn't pick it up at the time, someone told me. If I'd known at the time I would've kicked his head in. I'm not gonna put up with that shit from anybody. That's sick. And I find a lot of the stuff that the audiences here [in North America] take to be incredibly sexist. I wouldn't put up with some of the shit I've seen these Canadian and American guys do. They're macho pigs and I won't wear it. And you know what would happen to them in Australia? They'd be dragged off the stage and beaten to a pulp.

The comic quoted above, an Australian who performed at the Just For Laughs Festival, was genuinely shocked by what she perceived to be sexist attitudes by male comics. Aside from introductions and the actual content of their material (which sometimes displays overt hatred of women), these men share other questionable assumptions. For instance, there is the conviction that female comics are not in the same league as their male counterparts and, therefore, can only be compared to other

women. Simultaneously, they feel threatened by female comics. The following quotes illustrate these reactions to female comics:

> I'm a woman and I'll only be compared to other women. Which is such a piece of shit. They still talk about Joan Rivers, Carol Liefer, 'Yeah, funny...for a girl.'
>
> I don't like the brand of 'female comic' and that's the attitude they have, 'Well, she's good...for a girl.'
> There are a few comics who I've become really good friends with. And we are real close buddies but they're still very aware that I'm a woman. And I'm a woman comic. Double. So it's real hard.

While dismissing women as substandard, male comics simultaneously view them as a threat.A surefire sign of feeling threatened is expressing jealousy. Almost every female comic interviewed had stories to tell about envy from their male colleagues. Resentment was particularly strong after these women had enjoyed excellent performances and/or reviews:

> I did a great show in Montreal when Yuk Yuk's used to be there and I got the best review of all the guys. They hated me. They thought I had paid this reviewer -I never met him before.
>
> The male comics - very threatened. Once they almost wanted to beat my head in. We were playing a really tough club - bikers. They had all decided, without consulting me, that I wasn't going to be on that night, to protect me. [She went on anyway.]...I killed. They wouldn't talk to me. None of them, including the road manager. For the rest of the trip...total jealousy. They could never acknowledge, 'She's a real good comic.' No, no, 'She's a real good female comic.'
>
> There's a lot of problems right now because I did --- [a prestigious gig] and the guys who've been around ten years haven't done it. And so they say, 'You got it 'cause you got tits.' And I say, 'Listen, I got it from my audition'...It made me tougher because of the shit. They were all going, 'You're gonna eat it, you're gonna eat it,' and I lived with that for months before.

What are we to make of this apparent contradiction between dismissing women comics as substandard, not even worthy of consideration, and yet, clearly being threatened by their presence? This fear and discomfort arises from what can best be

described as role confusion. That is, women are not supposed to be aggressive, are not supposed to aspire to power. As soon as a woman takes on the role of a comic, she is upsetting the previously exclusive hold these men had on such a coveted privilege. They cover up this unconscious fear of women attaining, enjoying and using this power to possibly make them the objects of derision by assuring themselves that women are not worthy competitors.

The jealousy some male comics experience is based on the accurate, objective fact that women, as comedians, are successful, talented and skilled at their craft. Since the implications of this are too threatening to accept, some men try to convince themselves that these women have achieved their success not on the basis of their skills, but on the sympathy they generate because they are women.

Given these attitudes, it is evident that although the gatekeepers (management) and male comics acknowledge the presence of women in standup comedy, they do so reluctantly. Female comics are tolerated rather than accepted as equals. Again, while this is not true of all male comics, the harsh reality of not being accepted is one faced far too often by every female comic interviewed.

WOMEN IN COMEDY: ISOLATION

How do women cope in what is often a hostile work environment? When faced with adversarial audiences, hecklers and sexist introductions by emcees, is there anyone in their immediate environment to whom they can turn for that all important sense of comraderie? Unfortunately, they cannot. For the most part, women comics are marginalized and isolated. Sometimes, this is a conscious decision on their part. Several women interviewed insisted they have no desire to "hang out with the guys".

For one thing, they cannot tolerate sexist attitudes. Moreover, they do not feel they have anything in common with other comics. A few of them expand on this view:

> I'm not one of those people who hang out at the clubs. A lot of them do. I guess they have nothing better to do with their lives. I do...To be around comics, I don't find them funny and they all jerk off verbally with jokes. They top each other. They don't have a conversation, basically. They don't find out how you are - they give each other resumes and their critiques and their itinerary when you ask them how they are.
>
> They [other comics] take drugs and they sit around...I don't take drugs, I'm not a partier. I go, I do my shows, I go home. One night, a weekend on the road, I'll stay up and party for a few hours, I'll have a few drinks and that's all. I watch people whose acts I think are very funny, they've been doing it for ten years, they're going absolutely nowhere, down the tubes. And they are what they are and they're never gonna be more than they are.

A harsh assessment perhaps, but as we shall see in a later chapter, female comics do not intend to remain on the club circuit forever. Conscientious about their work and determined to improve, they would rather go home, review, critique and perfect their performance rather than engage in lengthy conversation with fellow comics.

It can be argued that the nature of being a standup comic, taking the stage alone and retaining full responsibility for one's performance, breeds a sense of isolation. While there is much truth in this observation, the fact remains that male comics do "hang out" together, often extending this comraderie beyond the parameters of the club scene and into their personal lives. One male comic talks about the reasons for this kinship, as well as its importance, while another explains why it is indigenous to men:

> Comics band together because we've got that one thing in common, we're the guys who normally end up on the shit-end of the stick. If someone's gonna get screwed, it's gonna be the comics, normally. Agents don't get screwed and club owners don't get screwed, and so that's why we hang around backstage, the one thread that ties the whole thing together is the performers themselves. The three of us come from totally different backgrounds and yet we have enough in

> common, we can sit there and have a hell of a good time, shoot the shit and know what we're talking about. So that's why we band together.
>
> The fact that women don't hang out is because it is really a sort of guy's profession, a real macho, like going into the auto industry. I did work for General Motors and you might as well be in a locker room.

The above observations highlight two points. The first is that while men can band together and complain about agents and club owners, women do not have anyone to commiserate with or vent their mutual frustrations. Secondly, because gender is made into such a big issue, women do not feel comfortable in what is often a locker room atmosphere.

Under normal circumstances, before entering an occupation, individuals look to members of that profession as a source of reference. Aspiring eventually to becoming a member, they begin to adopt this group's common ideology, norms, values and attitudes. For instance, becoming a doctor is not merely a matter of acquiring medical knowledge and expertise but of acting like a doctor should: adopting a competent demeanour, new mannerisms and behaviour. This situation is vastly different in the case of women who aspire to careers as standup comics. To begin with, although comraderie does occur (mostly among males), comedians cannot really be construed as a group with a clearly distinguishable set of values and norms. In fact, the opposite is true; comics come from all walks of life and the diversity in their backgrounds is matched by a variety of attitudes and lifestyles. As one veteran male comic states bluntly:

> It's such a weird business. It's not like a business where there's a whole bunch of normal people and then one aberration...Every club owner and every agent I've ever met is a little bit weird and most comics are too.

More importantly, even if male comics do share some common experiences and attitudes, these are not shared by women. Furthermore, the locker room atmosphere

and macho posturing would certainly discourage women from socializing with comics as a group, let alone adopting its perspective. The fact that female comics are a minority and rarely have a chance to perform with each other on the same bill compounds their sense of isolation. One pro regrets not having the opportunity to associate with other comediennes:

> I really don't see them as much as I would like to. The only time I met D. was two weeks before the "All Women's Show" that we did together. And oh, it was like a mutual bonding. It was so nice to speak to another woman in comedy. But we really don't see one another a lot.

It should be noted that two comediennes interviewed are friends while another two have both a friendship and a student/mentor relationship. Fortunately, these women have, because of their common experiences and understanding of the field, managed to find support. Yet, this does not change the central fact that women in comedy remain marginalized, on the periphery, unable or unwilling to be included as part of a select group of comic performers.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have seen how women are discriminated against at almost every turn. Sometimes it appears in subtle forms. Often it is much more blatant, as in sexist, demeaning introductions by male comics. Jealousy and resentment, when directed at women, is quite common, and as shall be demonstrated in chapter four, is based on the fear of them using the aggressive power of comedy to turn the tables on men. We have seen how management's policies and practices contribute to this sexism and how it permeates all levels of the comedy club circuit. Finally, it must be

reiterated that discrimination against women is built into the male defined structure and language of comedy.

In this discussion of the notion of standup as an aggressive medium, I have hinted at the reluctance of our society to accept aggression in women. While assertiveness is encouraged, to be aggressive is to be unfeminine. And here we come to the crux of the matter: women who venture into comedy are accused of trying to act like men. This is not stated in so many words but implied in a multitude of ways. In the next chapter, we shall see just how difficult it is for female comics to fight against these and equally damaging misconceptions.

Chapter 4: FUNNY WOMEN: MYTHS AND REALITIES

INTRODUCTION

We come now to the root of the discrimination and prejudice encountered by female comics: the norms and behaviours associated with "femininity". Although its meaning is taken for granted, the term feminine is not universal, nor does it lend itself to precise definitions. We begin, therefore, with an overview of feminist literature which concludes that femininity is, in fact, a socially constructed attribute which often disregards and contradicts the personalities of individual women. From here we move on to look at comediennes, who by their very presence in an aggressive field, are defying cultural definitions of femininity. This defiance of cultural convention is offered as a rationale for branding female comics lesbians. The "logic" seems to be, if a woman is a comic she is not feminine; if she swears and talks dirty like other comics, she is acting like a man; therefore, she is a "dyke". We shall see just how strong this myth is and how comediennes, in their visual presentations, attempt to counter these myths. While tactics vary with each individual, common strategies include dressing more elegantly (but not "too" femininely), using self-deprecation, and otherwise toning down their aggressiveness by being less crude and obscene than their male counterparts. These tactics of impression management are both strategies and reactions. That is, the comedienne becomes aware, at some point (usually during or after a performance), that the audience disapproved of her using expletives, or whistled as she came on stage dressed in a short skirt. She then faces the realization that she is in a sort of catch-22; either she is seen as a dyke or as a sex object. Either way, her sexuality suddenly becomes an issue. To deflect attention away from this, she reacts by dressing in a feminine manner without being "provocative", and coming across less strongly. These initial reactions become strategies for impression management. None of the strategies which

will be described below are mutually exclusive, and most women choose whichever they feel comfortable using. Given that, as we have seen, comediennes remain marginalized and have little contact with each other, there is no professional socialization which can teach them how to overcome, or at best minimize, the "dyke/sex object" dichotomy.

After examining these strategies, we will briefly examine how comediennes react to these unwritten rules and taboos, as well as some exceptions to the general pattern- women who insist they do not face discrimination on the basis of their perceived lack of femininity. The chapter concludes by stressing the links between the aggressive nature of comedy and doubts about the female comic's own femininity.

AGGRESSION AND FEMININITY: AN OVERVIEW

To a casual observer, the extent and depth of the resentment encountered by female comics, particularly from their male colleagues, is nothing short of baffling. If a comic, regardless of gender, is a funny, skilled performer, shouldn't this be all that matters? In the best of all possible worlds, comics would be judged solely on the basis of their talent. But we live in a society riddled with contradictions, unsubstantiated claims and rather odd assumptions when it comes to the question of gender. My intent in this chapter is not to rehash heated debates about who is responsible for the current confused state of gender relations. Nor is it enough to close the matter by concluding that most comedians are "male chauvinist pigs", club owners and managers being no better. These men did not suddenly wake up one morning with sexist attitudes. Indeed, for the most part, they honestly do not understand why their female colleagues react so violently to introductions which they perceive as neither sexist nor demeaning. Where then, do such attitudes come from? And why does the aggressive woman arouse such distaste and fear from both women and men?

SOCIALIZATION

To understand what are largely deep-seated emotional reactions, we must turn to an examination of our culture's socialization process. Despite years of education and a multitude of studies which demonstrate that little boys and little girls are more alike than they are different (Weitzman, 1979;Doyle, 1985), parents fall into the trap of expecting and reinforcing entirely different behaviours in their sons and daughters, based on cultural gender norms.

Socialization is, above all, a learning process wherein we are taught the norms, behaviours and attitudes which others expect us to exhibit. How we act depends to a great extent on our class, ethnicity, and gender. As such, socialization provides "links between the individual and society...interaction with other people is the means by which human potentialities are actualized" (Mackie, 1987:77).

In terms of gender, socialization begins as soon as the infant is wrapped in a pink or blue blanket. Despite any intentions to the contrary, most people respond to infants on the basis of preconceived gender norms. Studies show that adults describe what they think of as female infants as softer and delicate, boys as tougher and stronger, even when the infants are physiologically and temperamentally similar. Weitzman (1979) concludes that these results show that "sex role socialization begins before the child is even aware of a sexual identity" (p.3).

As primary and highly influential agents of socialization, parents talk and interact more with their daughters while they are rougher in play with their sons. Girls' and boys' rooms are even furnished differently (themes and colours conforming to gender stereotypes), and as children grow older, they are assigned gender-related household chores (Doyle, 1985:93). Through proscriptions and a system of rewards and punishments (both conscious and unconscious), boys are encouraged to roam freely,

thereby gaining a sense of independence, and to be more competitive and achievement oriented. Girls, on the other hand, are discouraged from developing these traits to the same extent as their brothers (Weitzman, 1979; Doyle, 1985).

If these lessons are not taught seriously by parents, children inevitably pick them up from a variety of persuasive, ubiquitous sources. For instance, fairy tales and picture books, in providing young children with their first glimpses of the outside world, are influential sources of learning (Weitzman, 1979). In most books, females are severely underrepresented and when included, are usually in passive, unstimulating roles. Clearly, their lives are dull in comparison to boys' adventurous odysseys. Although stereotypes inherent in children's books and television programs are extremely rigid, young children tend, nevertheless, to internalize them (Weitzman, 1979:10). By age five, both boys and girls show preference for the masculine role, having understood that society values males over females and prestige is almost always accorded to activities of the former. As Mackie (1987) points out, the cultural devaluation of females in addition to feminine aptitudes, skills and traits is a near universal pattern.

Focusing on North American society, Doyle (1985) outlines the gender norms considered appropriate to prove one's "manliness". Aggression is of paramount importance, as are the success ethic, being tough, independent and self-reliant. A fourth component, one which young children learn early on, is a distinctly anti-feminine bias. Simply put, this norm insists that men act as women wouldn't (Doyle, 1985:99). Therefore, feminine behaviour is looked down upon when exhibited by males and equally devalued when present in females. Young girls sense that the behaviour patterns to which they are expected to conform have been deemed as inferior. Weitzman (1979) argues that the gender socialization of young boys reinforces this cultural anti-feminine bias by punishing them for acting like "sissies" - translation: behaving as girls would in similar situations (p.12).

The lessons learned in early childhood are reinforced in the school system and by the media in general, where the plots in most movies and television shows revolve around the lives and decisions of males, with women playing minor characters- mothers, secretaries, love interests and victims (Doyle, 1985:99).

Throughout our lives, gender remains a salient part of our identities. Socialization, in effect, produces two separate worlds - one male and one female (Mackie, 1987:44). Aside from the fact that rigid gender norms disregard individual desires and abilities, there is another serious problem : it is the male world which is accepted as the norm, and to which women are expected to conform if they wish to be accepted .

One of the more subtle yet pervasive pressures on women is that they retain their femininity by not being aggressive. That is, they are permitted to be assertive, intelligent, successful, so long as their success, assertiveness and intelligence does not become a threat to male power. A large part of gender socialization involves teaching boys to be masculine and girls to be feminine. We now turn our attention to a definition of these terms and a critical analysis of cultural gender norms.

GENDER ROLES: A CRITIQUE

Discussions of the differences between men and women inevitably result in a great deal of confusion surrounding the terms male and female, masculine and feminine. To be male does not automatically imply one is masculine and the same applies to being female. Male and female refer to biologically based sexual characteristics, whereas masculine and feminine refer to gender. Given this distinction, characteristics which are arbitrarily assigned to males and females are cultural invention. In The Sceptical Feminist (1980), Janet Radcliffe Richards demonstrates that femininity is a purely social construct based on illogical assumptions, myths and half-truths. She points out that there are only two

inherent, natural (in the biological sense) differences between the sexes which are true for all women and men. The first is the difference in sexual organs and the second is the ability of women to reproduce:

> One of the principle differences between the sexes...is women's possessing an ability which men have not, and it would be closer to the truth to say that men were men in virtue of a lack of qualities, rather than women were women on that account (1980:162).

Thus, all other qualities are culturally ascribed. Or as Simone de Beauvoir's (1952) now famous dictum states: one is not born but made a woman.

Feminist criticism of learned gender roles should not be taken as an indictment of feminine or masculine characteristics per se. However, socially constructed gender roles become problematic when they restrict individual behaviour regardless of one's abilities. Traditionally, as soon as a woman's talents, aptitudes, choice of occupation and demeanour challenge society's definition of femininity, she may experience disapproval ranging from mild sanctions to the application of such unflattering labels as "castrating bitch". Indeed, society's approval may be less than forthcoming to members of either sex who violate the norms associated with masculinity and femininity. Dale Spender writes:

> Women who consistently and successfully control interactions are criticized by men and are likely to be called bitchy, domineering or aggressive (1980:49).

This, in a nutshell, is the problem faced by many comediennes. Clearly, aggression in women is not a favourable trait. However, this is not unique to comediennes but common to pioneer women in other traditionally male fields. For instance, in an article on women who work as manual labourers in the construction industry, a female carpenter has observed that other tradeswomen cannot give up wearing make-up for fear of losing their femininity (Baird, 1984).

Through their involvement in standup comedy, women are trying to make their mark in an aggressive environment. Let us now turn to a brief history of comedy as an art form.

COMEDY AND AGGRESSION: A BRIEF HISTORY

The equation of comedy with aggression and therefore, masculinity, dates back to its birth as an entertainment industry in the late 1800's, also known as vaudeville days. It is no wonder that women in comedy seemed like a contradiction in terms:

> It was considered unladylike for them to do physical humour and unfeminine for them to do hard-edged verbal satire because of its aggressive qualities (Martin and Segrave, 1986:11, emphasis mine).

In the above quote, we find an explanation for the ban against women comics, one which holds up remarkably well over a century later. We cannot end the matter here, however, for this explanation generates crucial questions which must be addressed. What do we mean by the terms "feminine" and "ladylike"? How do comediennes learn which styles and approaches are considered feminine? And how have these notions changed since women first entered the field of comedy?

For the sake of expediency and clarity, let us deal with the latter question first. Women In Comedy (1986), a fascinating, informative compilation of comedienne's careers from 1860 to the present, has a two part thesis. First it argues that the styles of humour in which women were (and still are) permitted to engage, are dictated by the cultural roles and status accorded to women by society in general. Thus, when women were forced into the exclusive roles of wife and mother, comediennes had no choice but to play up the "dumb blonde" role. Conversely, the 1920s, which ushered in a decade of freedom for women, gave comediennes considerably more leeway, allowing them to take pratfalls with the best of them. In this liberal atmosphere, women freely explored the

same comic styles as their male counterparts and no restrictions were placed on them. Unfortunately for them, the next thirty years set women and therefore, comediennes, back into demeaning, limiting roles. As shall be described in greater detail later, comediennes found their modes of creative expression seriously curtailed. It was not until the 1960's, with the second wave of feminism, that women began making great strides in comedy, particularly standup. This brings us to the second half of the book's thesis; that it is precisely the perception of humour as a powerful weapon - its aggressiveness - which deems it inappropriate for women.

The idea that women are much too delicate to be comics has diminished. However, vestiges of this earlier attitude still remain. In Martin and Segrave's Women In Comedy, the owner of a popular New York club admits:

> I think that definitely some people in the business are a bit close-minded to female standup comics (ibid:313).

This observation carries even more weight when juxtaposed with a 1979 "Rolling Stone" interview in which Johnny Carson, considered by many to be the king of standup comedy, defends his decision to showcase very few comediennes on "The Tonight Show":

> A woman is feminine, a woman is not abrasive, a woman is not a hustler...I think it's much tougher for women...And the ones that try sometimes are a little too aggressive for my taste (ibid:314).

To put the matter in perspective, not all influential people in the business would agree with Carson and many, such as David Letterman, do showcase comediennes with increasing regularity. Yet, the key point is this: the supposed incompatibility between femininity and aggressiveness, female and funny, still exists. In the next section, we will examine comediennes' understanding of the term femininity and how they deal with this incompatibility when they perform.

FEMININITY AND THE COMIC

We learn about femininity through socialization and these lessons are taught and absorbed, at least initially, without question. Even in the 1980's, subtle and not-so-subtle pressures to be ladylike are part of every young girl's experience. Richards writes, "What is possible or easy for one sex is made impossible or difficult for the other" (1980:172). Although comedy is certainly a possibility for women, its aggressive nature brands it an unfeminine occupation, thereby causing numerous difficulties. Indeed, this is the central problem faced by women pursuing a comedy career. A director of comedy development for a movie studio maintains:

> It's hard to hold on to whatever the hell femininity is and do standup (Collier and Beckett, 1980:154).

The literature contains many written accounts of female comics who grapple with this problem and it is a theme which drew together the comics interviewed for this particular study. Sooner or later, almost all of them became aware of the uneasy marriage between aggression and femininity:

> It's all the same sort of, society's image of them [women], is tied up, no matter how much you don't want it to be, with Mom. And it's a stupid image to have but I think a lot more women carry it within them than men...

Sometimes, this realization can come as quite a surprise, especially when one is working in a fairly egalitarian atmosphere. This was explained to me by two women, who, despite being excellent improvisers, tend to be perceived as women even when they are clearly playing male characters. In their own words:

> Any woman has a loss of femininity to be aggressive...I've come on playing a man at times. Now you still have problems there because even my own teammates don't see it. One time they set up this whole thing that, 'Oh, the devil will get you and Satan will get you,' and so

> I thought, well, if Satan has to come in I'll be Satan. I came in and they said, 'Oh, here comes the devil but he's taken on the form of a woman'...I came out with the physicalities of a man and they still didn't see it.
>
> I went into this scene and I had it in my head that I was being a guy. And I did all these guy-type things. I even went to the point of picking up a pipe and smoking a pipe, stuff like this, and sat down and this guy comes in and says, 'Well, hey Lolita,' and I looked at him as if to say, 'Is there anything I can do to <u>not</u> be a girl in this scene?'...They always assume first of all that you are a girl in the scene because you are a woman and you look like a woman, right?

These performers added that in both cases, while other women knew what they were up to, the men simply could not see it. (Men play women characters all the time by dressing up in "drag" and using a high-pitched voice.) The threat is not only that women are acting like men, but that there may be an unconscious fear of women becoming like men.

The image of women who are funny is composed of various elements, each complicating an already cluttered picture. The first, as we have seen, is the equation of comedy with aggression, which makes it unsuitable for women. Moreover, funny women meet with such disapproval because their humour is taken as an attempt to subvert male authority (Mackie, 1987:201). Connected to this is the conviction that women are simply not as funny as men:

> In our society, a man with a good sense of humour is someone who tells good jokes. A woman with a good sense of humour is someone who laughs at men's jokes (Eakins and Eakins, 1978:77, quoted in Mackie, 1987:206).

She is certainly not encouraged to tell her own jokes. This unfounded belief has had a profound impact on the socialization of women in terms of humour. As one comic interviewed says:

> The minute you are a giggling, laughing gelatinous mass, you're a woman - they give you that now - probably feminine, if you throw it

> in, and you've got a sense of humour...I think that under the tonnage of repression, one of the last things that will be rescued, that will be freed, is our ability to create humour. Women are very funny.

In Spare Ribs (1980), Anne Beatts, a former writer for "Saturday Night Live" who had also worked for "National Lampoon Magazine", maintains that women have been trained to laugh at jokes rather than make them and adds:

> I think they're afraid to take the spotlight away from men. They're afraid to speak out because they're afraid that their jokes will not be appreciated by men (Collier and Beckett, 1980:26).

Beatts adds that "Seventeen" and similar magazines dispensing tips to young girls caught in the fiercely competitive dating game always advise, "laugh at his jokes", the implication being that it is up to men to make the jokes and women to laugh at them. Many of the women interviewed for this study display an astute awareness of this insidious socialization process. The following quotes, the first taken from The Joke's On Us (1987), the others from my interviews, illustrates how women are neither thought of, nor encouraged to be funny:

> Because there are still males and there are still females, we're brainwashed into accepting we're two separate genders, by our parents, lovingly and unlovingly, and by our school teachers and by pubs and magazines and television adverts and everything that you see in general reminds you constantly that there women and there are men - there just aren't individuals, there aren't just people (Banks and Swift, 1987:249).

> It's such a weird thing but people really don't think that a woman's humour can be as genuinely funny as a man's. I mean, that's really wrong thinking, but that's for sure the way they think. So if you're a woman and you can make them laugh -wow! You've got the world then.

> Why are some women in it and some not?...because when you're at school, you're young and you're small, guys get really silly, sort of on the ego trip thing, and girls tend not to. When you're in the class, very few times is the girl the class clown, it's always the guy.

If girls are not socialized to be class clowns, they are certainly more reticent, as young women, to play the part of fools. In fact, it was suggested to me by an improv actress that the reason so few women become improvisers is because they are forced to give up the glamour associated with more classical feminine roles:

> I love doing characters that are not glamourous, like farmers and just people in the lower strata of living. Now to these other women, their idea of something non-glamourous is a slut or a prostitute, because they can still maintain the glamour, it's very safe for them, because a prostitute can be very beautiful...But get them to play a dog or something that they feel is very demeaning to themselves, and no way.

This insight illustrates how effectively women are socialized into protecting their femininity at all costs. Two of Britain's best known character actresses echo this sentiment:

> Traditionally, women are decorative. Ideal women do certain things, but one thing they always do is look nice. And for women to make fools of themselves goes against the grain of years and years of conditioning (Banks and Swift, 1987:98).
>
> One of the real problems of women in comedy is narcissism. You've got to be prepared to make yourself look ridiculous and lots of women find that very difficult to do (ibid:196).

Looking ridiculous is a stumbling block which women already engaged in comedy have managed to overcome. Other barriers are more difficult to circumvent because they come from external sources, namely their audiences. While all comics must gain acceptance from their audiences, this is more difficult for women, who provide a challenge to the traditional definition of standup comic. Consideration will now be given to how female comics, particularly those who are conventionally attractive, are perceived and how they deal with these perceptions.

BEAUTY AND THE COMIC

If women who enter standup comedy are clearly perceived as a threat, this is doubly true of conventionally beautiful women. To be both funny and beautiful, attractive and powerful, is much too threatening. The authors of Spare Ribs (1980) contend:

> Some women, especially those who perform, run into an image problem - the difficulty of retaining their femininity while being funny. Attractiveness combined with the ability to make others laugh seems to be too much of a good thing. Both bring with them attention and power (1980:xii).

This theme is reiterated often in the three books already quoted which deal with women in comedy. The injunction against females being both attractive and funny in a powerful way, was particularly strong up until recently, although vestiges of this attitude still remain.

As mentioned previously, Women In Comedy, in examining American women's participation in comedy from vaudeville to radio, film, television and standup, illustrates how historically, attractive female performers were forced into the dumb blonde stereotype (with, of course, a few exceptions). Women who were not conventionally attractive were permitted to take on roles in which they were not always portrayed as "dumb" or helpless. Once again, the types of comedy in which women were permitted to engage were tied to the cultural status and roles accorded to women. For instance, in the early years, women in silent films were allowed a considerable degree of freedom and attractive women were not barred from engaging in highly physical slapstick. (Previously, slapstick had been deemed unfeminine and unladylike. It also had women assertively and independently chasing others and throwing pies in their faces with the same zeal and delight as men.) It is no accident that this coincided with a

period in history when women, emerging from the suffocating restrictions of the Victorian era, enjoyed a great deal of freedom.

Less than a decade later, the Depression, resulting in rampant unemployment and loss of self-esteem, dealt a serious blow to the male ego. Hence, it was no longer appropriate for women to be seen as independent - financially, sexually and otherwise. Aggression and assertiveness, the mainstay of slapstick comedy, were replaced by stupidity and the "man-chasing" label:

> The dumb blonde image bolstered the male's need to see himself as breadwinner, protector and decision-maker in the family at a time when these roles were increasingly stripped away from him by the harsh realities of the day (Martin and Segrave, 1986:100).

During this period, a highly restrictive dichotomy arose, one which would remain in effect for decades: a woman could not be simultaneously attractive and aggressive. If she was physically attractive, she was assigned the dumb role. If, on the other hand, she wished to be more aggressive, she was forced to purposely make herself look "ugly" (ibid:103). The dumb image appealed to men because it was non-threatening and reinforced their supposedly "natural" superiority. It appealed to women because at least they could say, with no small measure of relief, that they were not nearly as "dumb". Martin and Segrave conclude:

> It seems more than coincidental that a society threatened by the triumph of female suffrage and by the brazen sex-role transgressions of young women in the 20's so enjoyed the stage stereotype of the dumbbell (ibid).

The distinction between attractive and unattractive women, exaggerated by media critics, continued to plague comediennes. For instance, it was said about one woman that she "learned to capitalize on a face and figure that would have ruined the life of another woman" (ibid:212).

Lest anyone argue that this attitude has changed for the better, a popular Australian comedienne relates how men in the audience attempted to crush her spirit:

> Men are cretins, yeah, sure, because they feel themselves superior and they don't like to be outwitted by a woman. And the thing that they'll resort to is that they'll say, 'Why are you laughing? You're ugly,' or, 'I wouldn't wanna fuck you if you were the last woman on earth.' And they think they have power over you in that way.

Another professional comic, an American, recalls how booking staff and club owners had so much trouble dealing with her because she could not be pigeon-holed in the stereotypes assigned to women:

> I certainly don't put myself down, I do the opposite with that, and I'm not really mean, I'm not hostile, I don't look like I got hit by a truck...These are things they like to categorize women as. So it was like, 'We can't handle this. She's not creepy looking and she's powerful and she's, oh, we hate this, we're scared of this.'

Once again, the threat that smart, funny and attractive women pose to others is all too real. Comics who are not beautiful are tolerated with the patronizing assumption that they use humour to compensate for their lack of "good looks". Attractive women who refuse to play the part of dummy face a great deal of hostility. While this is an issue only two of the comics interviewed touched on , it is one which appears with regular frequency in the research on women in comedy. Based on her experience as a comedy writer, Anne Beatts offers this profound insight:

> I think that the reason men are so hung up and so afraid of women being funny - especially attractive women, they don't mind if old, ugly, fat women are funny - is because they link it with sexuality and they are unconsciously afraid that the ultimate joke will be the size of their sexual apparatus (Collier and Beckett, 1980:28).

Apparently, this is not a minority opinion. The Australian comedienne interviewed for this study quoted Joan Rivers as having made a similar observation. As for

the broader question of attractiveness and comedy, one comic interviewed for this study, an American pro, expressed genuine frustration over the furor her attractiveness causes, adding it also affects how she dresses:

> I like to dress up, I like to look sexy but...for a while I was wearing a black leather skirt and heels. I had to stop because I got so much shit from the audience. Also I notice that women in the audience, pretty women especially, they don't laugh. [H: You think they feel threatened by you?] Absolutely. Absolutely. And I think there's also this stigma, like I am violating a clause in the pretty women's contract: 'How dare she? You're not supposed to be funny.

It is important to realize that resentment comes not only from men but from other attractive women as well. They too have learned their lessons well; that it is highly unfeminine to be both aggressive and funny. Moreover, women who exhibit this combination of traits are often accused of being lesbians. It is to this assumption that we now turn our attention.

THE DYKE MYTH

Many comediennes charge onto the stage with an abundance of energy and enthusiasm. However, it would be overstating the case to suggest that they are oblivious to their perceived femininity. The term perceived is used quite deliberately here, for they believe that audiences and fellow comics are too eager to pass judgement on their femininity (or supposed lack thereof). Further, many male comics brand their female counterparts as lesbians. Comediennes find this accusation particularly insidious not because the idea of lesbianism disturbs them, but because of the implication that they are harbouring a secret desire to be men. This "dyke" myth was alluded to and discussed by almost every single comedienne interviewed, as is evident in the following comments:

> Every male comic thinks if you're a woman comic you're a dyke. That's true. All the time.
>
> The gauge of a woman's sense of humour has always been according to men, her ability to appreciate humour, not generate. The minute you are generating humour you are an aggressive, ball-busting dyke.
>
> You get it [condescension] all the time. Unless you've made it. Carol Liefer for example, Elayne Boosler. But then, they're probably dykes- that attitude.

Like all myths, this one is based largely on stereotypes. What upsets comediennes is the very speculation and scorn which is heaped on their supposed sexual orientation. Whether or not they are lesbians has no bearing on their comic talent or expertise and thus, should not be an issue. However, since it can affect whether or not audiences respond favourably to them, most comediennes develop what are essentially impression management strategies to counter this dyke myth. Female comics must look "feminine" and "nice". However, because comediennes want people to pay attention to their skills rather than their attractiveness, they try not to look "too nice". This dilemma is neatly summarized by two standup comics:

> You don't wanna look too good because you don't want people to dislike you because of your looks and then you don't wanna look too shabby because then all the guys think if it's a woman in comedy, she's gotta be a dyke.
>
> There's no way I will wear a dress on stage. I will not wear real tight-fitting blue jeans or tops or anything. I make it as neutral as possible...I just try to detract from the way I look as much as possible. I wear a lot of baggy clothes on stage. I even wear men's vests, men's jackets, shirts, the whole bit. I'm really conscious of that, boy. It's not that I dress shabby or anything, but just so they're not saying, 'Ooh, look at that see-through skirt'.

In the following sections, we shall examine the various strategies women employ for coping with the "dyke myth". These include paying careful attention to how they dress, refraining from the use of too much vulgarity, and staying away from "taboo" topics in terms of material.

DRESSING TO BE HEARD, NOT SEEN

Women are fully aware that their aggressiveness, a necessary criterion for comic performing, is perceived as a denial of their femininity. Consequently, they pay close attention to the whole question of dress - what they wear and their visual impact. Clothing does, after all, make an immediate statement. The veteran pro who made the following assertion was probably well aware of the impact of clothing and the necessity of achieving a balance between looking completely feminine or masculine:

> Women have to dress differently. They have to dress a little more femininely so people won't accuse them of being lesbians.

In our society, first (and lasting) impressions are constantly being formed on the basis of appearance. Generally, this judgement is more severe for women than men, as is evident by an exhaustive cosmetics and fashion industry, supported by the media, concerned exclusively with women's appearance. While men's fashion, an industry in itself, is currently in vogue, cultural pressures on men to have extensive wardrobes are not nearly as strong as they are for women.

In countless hours of observation in comedy clubs and venues, I noticed male comics dressed in anything from jeans to suits. While many women were casually dressed, no female standup ever wore faded jeans, sneakers and an old, worn T-shirt, an outfit commonly favoured by young male comics. Female standups share a dilemma faced by all women who wish to be taken seriously: how to dress femininely without appearing too feminine. This is nowhere near as simple nor as trivial a matter as it seems. As Susan Brownmiller writes in Femininity:

> Serious women have a difficult time with clothes, not necessarily because they lack a sense of style, but because feminine clothes are not designed to project a serious demeanour (1984:101).

This is not to say that comediennes, whose business is to make people laugh, have any desire to appear dour and serious. However, they do wish to be taken seriously as comics, to be heard rather than ogled. The added problem, as we have seen, is the myth that if a woman is a comic, she must be a lesbian. So how do female comics decide what to wear? Most explain that since, as performers their bodies are their best instruments, comfort and ease of movement are their prime considerations. While this is especially true of improvisers, it is a reality which the majority of standup comics touched upon as well:

> I certainly wouldn't feel comfortable up there with spiked heels. I know I'd look good but I wouldn't be able to walk. I have to dress the way I am.
>
> I'm not there to present my sexuality, so I don't...I don't dress for comedy, I dress for comfort. I'll dress so that I'll look nice...I feel better as a performer when I put on some attitude about my body and how I'm perceived.
>
> I've always dressed very comfortably. Like, loose clothing so that you are neutral.

Dressing for comfort is essential according to the comics interviewed. However, baggy, neutral clothing, the androgynous look, makes their femininity suspect. Brownmiller contends that this is true of society in general since, "functional clothing is a masculine privilege and practicality is a masculine virtue" (1984:86). Faced with the accusation that they are lesbians or otherwise unfeminine, many female standups add decidedly feminine touches - soft sweaters, frilly blouses, jewellery - to offset the pants and sensibly low-heeled shoes. Comics explain how they pay careful attention to their femininity:

> My problem is that because I do dress pretty conservatively, I wasn't looking very feminine, I thought, on stage when I first started. So that's why I've added these little [touches], I try to look a little more elegant when I'm up there.

> I wear make-up and jewellery. I can't wear a torn shirt and old jeans like some of the guys do. Not that I'd want to. They dress too sloppy. If I'm performing in a bar I'll wear jeans and a T-shirt but not a torn one...There's also the thing that women are always judged by what they wear. And if a woman dresses sloppy, people automatically turn off.

The concern with looking feminine, regardless of how it is defined on an individual level, is not limited to the women in my sample. The literature on female comics in the United States and Britain indicates this is a concern which clearly cuts across national boundaries, having much to do with near universal definitions of masculinity and femininity. In Collier and Beckett's Spare Ribs (1980), seventeen comedy writers and performers, all women, were interviewed, and many talk about how and why they dress the way they do. For instance, Suzanne Rand, the female half of an improvising duo, performed in a soft pink dress partly to enhance her femininity and partly for shock value - people were more surprised that she, rather than he (her partner), was the funny one (1980:41). Zora Rasmussen, another performer, held what turned out to be a minority opinion by playing up her attractiveness, claiming , "I think it's important for women in comedy at this point to have a look" (ibid:19).

On the other hand, the majority of professional funny women, particularly those working in Britain, have mixed feelings about the necessity of maintaining some kind of glamourous image. The following quotes, taken from The Joke's On Us, are examples of these feelings:

> An audience doesn't want a woman to look stupid. They want her to look glamourous or vulnerable (Banks and Swift, 1987:87).

> When I first started it was really cropped hair, bovver boots. Then it softened down a bit...I would look like, potentially somebody's wife, somebody's girlfriend, somebody's sister, so that men in the audience would not just be able to dismiss me as some stroppy lesbian (ibid:26).

> I will know that I am truly liberated when I can bear to go on stage without an inch of make-up, nothing, not even look in the mirror

> before I go on. I would love to be able to do that but I can't and I don't know any other female comics who can (ibid:86).

In and of itself, to be concerned with one's image is not a vice. On the contrary, visual presentation is an essential element of comic performing. Hence, one may well ask, how realistic is this fear of being looked at rather than paid attention to? The answer, interestingly enough, is supplied in an indirect way by the improv actresses interviewed who spoke about how they dress on stage. Because improvising relies heavily on fluidity of movement and the taking on of a variety of characters, improvisers, male and female, wear loose cotton clothing. However, occasionally, an actress new to improvising will make the mistake of wearing skirts, high heels and tight fitting tops. Two improvisers related stories which are worth quoting here because they clearly illustrate just how much audiences are affected by what women wear:

> I always wear a baggy shirt and a T-shirt. I was come down [told off] on stage for taking off my shirt. It was a gag that I shouldn't have done but the guys felt that the way I had done it was sexual. I hadn't realized, but it came across and it ticked people off because it wasn't funny...If you're gonna come on stage as a woman, stuff yourself obviously, wear like a big huge skirt over your pants, don't be sexy...if you're wearing a skirt, you're sitting on stage, you're up above the audience, if they can see up the skirt that's a)distracting for the men and b)just angry for the women and it's not funny at all.
>
> We had these two women that, the first one, she is really gorgeous, especially beautiful, but she wore high heels onto the stage...with a plain dress, but I would never wear a dress on stage, it doesn't give me freedom, I'd be conscious [of it] all the time. But high heels, that just sets you right there, you will not play anything for the rest of the night but a mother or a secretary or something very stereotypically female...You lost the audience. Just visually looking at you, you lost them...This other woman did the same thing. She's a very buxom, voluptuous woman and very beautiful...She was dressed in high heels and a very tight fitting top...The audience was just looking at her T-shirt the whole time. And once you do something really interesting visually, the audience becomes deaf. They don't hear a thing you're doing, they're not paying attention.

How they look and what they wear is a constant source of anxiety for female comics, one which their male colleagues seem not to trouble with. The situation is even more complicated for conventionally attractive women who, since they are judged first and foremost by their appearance, face added prejudice. Dress is certainly an important consideration for comediennes, but is only one of a number of unwritten rules to which they must adhere. In the next section we shall look at a few more of these taboos.

THE DO'S AND DONT'S OF PERFORMING: SWEARING

According to Banks and Swift (1987:1), "Standup is seen as a male domain: aggressive, dangerous and obscene." We have seen how the aggressive nature of standup, coupled with deeply entrenched, widely held cultural beliefs that it is "unladylike" to be aggressive, translates into a variety of problems for comediennes. It follows then, that they soon discover, largely through trial and error, those things audiences will simply not tolerate coming from a woman. Not surprisingly, these very same jokes delivered by men are considered highly amusing. Thus, what is actually being said is not nearly as important as who says it, or, to be more specific, the gender of the speaker. One veteran comic provides her list of do's and dont's:

> I can't swear, I can't be as dirty as the guys. I can't be crude. I can't dress as sloppy as the guys. I have to be a little bit more sophisticated, a little bit more feminine. And what is feminine? We only know what we're taught is the stereotype of feminine.

By far, the most common prohibition comediennes discussed has to do with the use of swear words, which are labelled inappropriate:

> Men can say: fuck, shit, cocksucker, and it's funny. A woman saying that is a dyke bitch. Because women are not supposed to say that

> unless there's something wrong with them. I've never sworn on stage. Mainly because it's a family show, I don't feel I want to.
> I don't like to swear on stage because you can't be blond and have green eyes and go, 'Fuck you, you motherfucker.' It's like, 'Pardon me?' And also I'm not that comfortable doing it and if you're not comfortable with it, they're not gonna buy it.

This is not to say that women shun swearing, for the club scene encourages, and audiences often demand a degree of vulgarity. The taboo does not forbid women from using expletives but concerns the degree of vulgarity which they are permitted to use. Depending on the performance venue, locale and audience composition, swearing may be necessary, encouraged, tolerated or met with extreme disapproval. The following example from my fieldnotes illustrates how, despite a comedienne's personal objection to the use of obscenities, at times it is a necessity:

> It was obvious as to why the audience wasn't laughing nearly as much or as hard as they had for the other comics: her act did not contain much vulgarity...After two hours of a fairly 'dirty' show, her act just didn't fit and the audience was not prepared to accept it.

In my observations, obscenities uttered by male comics elicited neither shock nor disgust. Because women run a greater risk of offending audiences due to gender norms (indeed, some may find their very presence on stage to be offensive), they must be more careful in this regard. The following quotes from comediennes explain the dilemma swearing poses:

> I do the gutter humour stuff, which I don't feel good about, see. And those things I may kill at, I got a lot of it, but I don't feel good when I go home. Because I know what it was.

> When I first started comedy I was very careful, I had a clean act...And I would work and say, 'Oh, I can't swear, it's beneath me.' And you find after you're on the road for a while, you do it if you have to do it to get a laugh and survive.

Clearly, many women who do swear do so reluctantly, acquiescing to audiences' preferences. The fact is (and my observations bear this out), there are some audiences

who will laugh at nothing other than a host of four-letter obscenities strung together along with the ever popular "dick jokes". Attending amateur nights at comedy clubs can be enlightening for this very reason. Almost every single young man between the ages of 17-24 who takes the stage to perform a short routine will utter several obscenities in a row.

One of the most striking differences between male and female comics is not only the amount of vulgarity used, but how audiences respond to its use. The common explanation for shocked faces and raised eyebrows when swear words are uttered by women may be, "It's unladylike to swear." The hidden truth probably has to do with the sexual connotations of four letter words. As Kramarae (1980) writes:

> Our understanding of what women say, of what men say, depends in part upon our understanding of what women do/should/can say and what men do/should/can say (p.60).

In her book about femininity, Brownmiller contends that the injunction against swearing is an outgrowth of men's power over speech, sexuality and aggression, while Mackie notes that much vulgarity is in fact, directed against women:

> Using expletives is another mode of expression which runs counter to femininity and the power relationship in the most basic of ways (Brownmiller, 1984:123).

> Women have been 'protected' from obscenity yet made the object of much of it(Mackie, 1987:195).

Although women do swear, they do so to a lesser degree than male comics and, generally, would prefer to stay clear of obscene language. Indeed, many simply refuse to use four letter words. However, swearing is only one of the taboos which women try not to violate. In this next section, we shall look at other do's and dont's, namely, explicit descriptions and lesbianism.

EXPLICIT DESCRIPTIONS AND LESBIANISM

Insofar as they are given the license to say virtually whatever they wish in front of strangers, comics are in an enviable and potentially powerful position. Under the guise of humour, they can be verbally "naughty". By far, the topic which generates the most humourous remarks and the greatest amount of laughter is sex and male/female relationships. Regardless of their gender, standup comics have a field day with the subject, each colouring it in a unique way with their own personal observations. Once again, there are differences in the approach which women and men take towards this topic. However, the differences here are subtle, the unwritten rules not as easily detected. In listening to their comments, one senses that women are permitted to use and often excel at sexual innuendo, but are in danger of crossing the invisible line if and when their humour becomes too explicit. Two comediennes relate how they discovered, in no uncertain terms, that their material was too blatant:

> I can't say 'cunt' on stage. I said that a couple of times and a hush fell over the audience like you would not believe, mouths dropped open, they could not believe I would say anything like that...There are sometimes when they go, 'Wait, this is a chick talking like the boys.' Yeah, well, chicks can talk like the boys, sometimes we talk better than the boys.

> You can't be blatant. I used to have a couple of jokes that were blatant sexually...I thought this was funny. All the women thought it was funny too, but the men were shocked. I mean, they were just cringing in their seats when they heard this. People actually came up and told me, 'This is really too much.'

Although what women can get away with depends, to a great extent, on the venue and audience for which they perform, there is one definite taboo: the subject of lesbianism. Among the few comediennes who discussed this, there was unanimous agreement on just how violently audiences react to the topic:

> There was a team of these three women and they were called 'Cunning Stunts'...They were doing scenes about lesbianism and they would say the word 'vagina' which everyone would go, 'Ahh!' And audiences were going, 'What is this? This is not funny'...I find that's one thing I cannot do is to show, I mean, lesbianism is taboo.

As we saw in an earlier chapter, one emcee delighted in introducing two women as each others' lovers, considering this to be a joke of the highest order. The contradiction is fascinating; male comics often talk about homosexuality in a most derogatory manner and, in fact, insult hecklers by implying they are gay, and yet, stunned silence falls over audiences when a woman even dares to mention lesbianism. To my knowledge, there is no research on this topic, but I suspect it relates back to the whole dyke myth and the unconscious fear that women will acquire so much power that men will eventually become expendable.

Turning to the literature, occasionally comediennes address this link between sexuality and the fear of female comics. For instance, Andrea Martin denies experiencing discrimination due to her sex but admits that most audiences are afraid to laugh at lesbian themes unless performed in broad caricature (Collier and Beckett, 1980:217).

It must be reiterated that what is permitted or rather forbidden to women comics is intimately related to society's cultural values and norms. This becomes quite clear when we examine the barriers faced by British comediennes. While they too have a list of do's and dont's, in some ways similar to ours, in other ways they are different. One pro standup comic provides the British version:

> There are several things that a woman can't mention no matter how crude she gets...She can use any of the four letter expletives. She can do anything except she can't mention Tampax or anything to do with the menstrual cycle and she can't mention fart, for some reason (Banks and Swift, 1987:20).

Aside from following these unwritten rules, there are other ways in which comediennes carefully control the impressions they wish to convey. One of these is the use of self-deprecation, and it is to this somewhat controversial subject that we now turn.

SELF-DEPRECATION

In Spare Ribs(1980), Phyllis Diller talks about the overwhelming barriers she ran up against as a female pioneer in the standup comedy field. Since, initially, her form of humour was not taken seriously, she purposely adopted a brash, tacky, aggressive stage persona. To this day, she insists that as the only woman in a male dominated field, she had to use self-deprecation.

The whole issue of self-deprecation is one which must be addressed for a number of reasons. To begin with, it relates directly to the apparent contradiction between aggression and femininity. Secondly, in recent years, comediennes who rely on self-deprecation have come under fire from feminists who accuse them of perpetuating the "women-as-inferior-victims-masochists" stereotype. How do comediennes respond to these allegations? They argue, quite convincingly, that since audiences were so threatened by female comics, it was necessary to win them over by appearing as non-threatening as possible. The best way to accomplish this was by knocking themselves down. A very attractive British comic who works in "rough dives" admits:

> So the first thing you've got to do, in my case anyway, is knock yourself so they start defending you. Then they think, 'She's not that bad,' or, 'Well, at least she knows she's a mess,' and then it confirms in their mind that you're not as hot as you look. Then you're all right (Banks and Swift, 1987:21).

The women interviewed and observed for this study, by and large, were not self-deprecating. Occasionally they would poke fun at themselves, but without displaying self-hatred. Generally, these remarks were kept to a minimum and this was the norm for many male comics as well. One pro comic interviewed defends her use of self-deprecation:

> I gotta tell you, it's a great way to open an act. You're showing people you're vulnerable, you're a real person and you're open to faults. And they're funny. Self-deprecation is really funny. And it works.

According to this (and undoubtedly other) comics, self-deprecation has several functions. First, it is a highly effective defense mechanism. By making light of one's flaws before anyone else in the audience has a chance to capitalize on them, the comic gains control of a potentially threatening situation. As Sheldon Unger, in a sociological analysis of self-mockery phrases it:

> Self-deprecating banter can also diffuse anticipated responses to stigmatized identities...[they] make themselves the butt of their jokes to preempt others' comments (1984:129).

Ungar's analysis corroborates comediennes' observations that self-deprecation allows their audiences to view them as human and thus, to identify with their foibles. Ungar writes that self-mockery serves to "augment emotional solidarity and personal identification with others" (ibid:126). Seen in this light, self-deprecation is a strategic ploy to win audiences over and enhance comic/audience interaction.

Given the cultural devaluation of females, it is perhaps not surprising that they be allowed to engage in self-deprecation, yet be forbidden to act in ways that are permissible to men.

REACTIONS AND EXCEPTIONS

Whether they work in Britain, the United States or Canada, comediennes are fully aware of what amounts to restrictions on their material and creative expression. Individual reactions vary. Some express anger at discriminatory practices which men do not face, others have learned to accept the rules of the game. The following quotes, the first from the literature and the other from an amateur comic in my sample, illustrate these reactions:

> Men can be gross and get away with it. We have to be very careful not to step on the male ego (Martin and Segrave, 1986:315).

> They're [men] allowed to be as low as they can get. We're not. We really aren't. And you might as well accept it if you want to be a female comic or else fight, fight. fight. I'm not particularly into shaking up the male ego that much. See, they can talk about their cock or whatever and it doesn't - for some reason women don't get offended by that.

Acceptance of this particular reality - the different rules for men and women on the circuit - need not be read as a sign of resignation or acquiescence. Common sense dictates that allowing this to upset them would interfere with their productivity. As one pro puts it:

> You know they know you're a woman. That's it. It's like you're a pink elephant on stage. They're not gonna forget you're a pink elephant even though you're good at rolling the ball. And that's fine, but as long as they know I'm good first.

While most of the comediennes interviewed work despite these restrictions, there are exceptions to this general pattern. Significantly, the two comics interviewed who do not work on the mainstream circuit are also the ones who did not mention facing any restrictions. The only other performer who claimed to be able to get away with just about anything is an American comic who works on the mainstream circuit but

whose humour is definitely innovative. She admits she is free of restrictions because, through costume and demeanour, she has adopted a stage persona in which she claims to be the god of her very own religion, thus giving her power over her "subjects":

> I feel that I can do anything. I got this guy to be my personal love slave on stage...What I'm really saying is I'm a goddess and I can get anybody to do anything I that I want.

CONCLUSION

Like all forms of prejudice, the discrimination faced by female comics is not easily overcome. Nor can it be dismissed as the product of diseased, spiteful minds. The resentment and fear of comediennes is based upon years of conditioning and socialization in which both men and women are taught that aggression and femininity are diametrically opposed. In this chapter, we have examined how comediennes must come to grips with this dichotomy. As we have seen, these myths and assumptions necessitate that comediennes develop strategies to manage the impressions they make on audiences. These include using self-deprecation, dressing in certain ways, not being as crude and vulgar as male comics and staying away from certain taboo topics. To dispel the myth that they are lesbians and/or harbour a secret desire to be men, comediennes dress and act in ways which make them appear less threatening without being too stereotypically feminine. In effect, because they are seen as women first, one of their primary goals is to deemphasize their sexuality. To complicate matters even further, attractive women are accused of violating the norm which states that an attractive woman cannot be simultaneously funny. All of these seemingly illogical reactions must be traced back to the concept of femininity and the notion that women are quieter, more passive, and ultimately inferior to men. Herein lies the threat: women who are funny have power, and thus, are not really inferior. Far from being confined to comedy clubs,

this idea affects female comics' personal relationships as well. It is fitting then, to conclude this chapter with a quote from Joan Rivers who, in her autobiography, describes the joy she experienced in her close friendship with another witty woman:

> We discussed the trouble men had dealing with a girl who was obsessed with her work and was funny and quick and maybe, God forbid, a mental equal. We agreed femininity and humour were not supposed to go together and men were thrown off balance by us, were afraid of us, and we had to hold back, be careful not to banter with them, not to top them (1986:163).

Having an understanding of the environmental conditions and the forms of discrimination based on cultural attitudes tied to gender roles which women face, the next chapter will deal with more practical matters. We shall examine, in greater detail, the "nitty-gritty" involved in being a comic. What do comediennes do, what does their craft entail, what are the possible routes their careers may take, what are their goals? These are only some of the questions which will be addressed in chapter five.

Chapter 5
CAREER: SO, YOU WANNA BE A COMEDIENNE ?

INTRODUCTION

The comedy industry is not one which welcomes women into its ranks with open arms. As we have seen, women are still considered female comics, another species, not quite fitting in. Yet, obviously there are women who, in choosing to become comics, defy convention and traditional occupational choices for women. This chapter will examine comedy as a career. We begin by going back into their childhoods to discover when their initial interest in comedy began and whether or not they perceived themselves as funny. We also look at the first hurdle all comics face - getting over their fears of standup. An attempt is made to map out the typical stages in a comedy career, emphasizing that as a creative endeavour, comedy cannot be categorized as neatly as other professions such as law and medicine. Briefly, the typical career passes from the amateur stage, where comics test the field and learn the ropes, to the professional, which includes recognition for his or her work and improvement in skills and techniques to branching out and, for those who make it that far, fame and greater control over their own careers. Within these stages, we will discuss various career contingencies, including commitment, parental support and the goals and rewards of doing comedy. From this detailed look at the career development thus far of the comics interviewed for this study, we then move on to a description of their daily work - the specific problems facing comics as a whole,and the mechanics involved in the creation of a routine.

The process of becoming a comic and learning the mechanics involved is the same for all comedians, regardless of gender. Both women and men must work on their timing, delivery and overall presentation, skills which can only be learned through

practice and experience. They must cope with failure, stage fright and similar anxieties inherent in solo performing which, since they involve internal psychological processes, cannot be taught. Moreover, all comics follow similar career stages. Thus, in many ways, male and female comics have much in common. However, gender differences undoubtedly affect how some of these skills are learned. Since women are a minority in the field, and for the most part, remain marginalized, they learn most of these lessons on their own, through trial and error and observing other comics. Presumably, since males can and do develop comraderie, they have an easier time in this regard. Hanging out with other comics will surely enable them to pick up hints which may speed up the actual learning process. Moreover, while the skills used by comediennes are no different from those used by male comics, their approaches and emphasis may very well reflect a less aggressive orientation. In addition, just as the entire field and structure has been male defined, so too are the career lines and definitions of success. This will become clearer when we examine the careers of those women who shun mainstream comedy and work by their own rules.

The purpose of this chapter is to establish what being a standup comic involves. Since this study was limited to female comics, definitive gender differences in career patterns cannot be ascertained here. Instead, we will attempt to answer these questions: How does a woman become a professional comic? What does a comic actually do? And finally, what is the process whereby she learns to be a comedienne?

INITIAL INTEREST AND FEARS

Given all the difficulties faced by comedians; the constant pressure to prove oneself night after night, living with the "you're only as good as your last show" adage, exposing oneself to the risk of humiliation at the hands of strangers who delight in

calling out insulting remarks, why in the world would anyone choose to be a standup comic? Certainly, the rewards, although few and far between, make all the risks and suffering worthwhile. But, as I quickly discovered, there is a fundamental error in the assumption that the women interviewed for this study consciously chose comedy as a career. Indeed, it would be more appropriate to say comedy chose them. While many trace their initial interest in humour back to childhood, few ever conceived of translating this interest into a career. One pro recalls:

> I've always been interested in comedy. When I was in college I studied drama and film and all the projects that I did were always funny.

Yet, when her own mother suggested she give standup comedy a try, her gut response was, "You're out of your fucking mind." Another performer who currently works on the alternative circuit explains how even though she always knew she had talent, she remained unaware of its distinctiveness:

> Somewhere along the line, one in every seven million babies got zapped with the gift of laughter and the ability to create it. I did too and have always been able to amuse or console by way of laughter...I wasn't aware of its commercial ramifications until later in life.

The literature on comics, (mostly male), emphasizes that most, in a sense, began their careers in school by being the class clown. Interestingly enough, only one of the comediennes interviewed for this study alluded to having played this role. In fact, a substantial number discovered their comedic ability much later in life, in their last years of high school and beyond. During one of her first solo performance pieces, one woman was shocked to hear the audience laughing. "A lot of people thought it was funny and I don't know why." She is still not completely comfortable referring to herself as a comic claiming, "In my daily life I'm not funny." This perception is shared by others, including an improv actress who, although she has always been drawn to comic roles,

insists, "I'm not funny." Yet another comic resisted her friends' efforts to convince her to perform on amateur nights by saying, "Nah, I'm not that funny." Thus, comediennes fall into two categories; those who always knew they were funny and those who may, to this day, insist they are not.

Unlike many career choices, professional, artistic and otherwise, there seems to be no logical progression in the minds of these comediennes, between an awareness of their talent for making people laugh and the decision to become a comedian. Indeed, as illustrated in the quotes above, many women actively resisted the suggestion. This resistance can, in part, be attributed to the understandable fear of standup comedy. This fear, based on the risk of taking the stage alone, plagued almost all the women interviewed, from standup comics to improv actresses with extensive theatrical experience. In their words, fear has many synonyms:

> It was just too scary...I would see them doing this standup at late night shows and go, 'I could never do that!'
>
> The thought of it terrified me...standing up there alone scared the shit out of me.The biggest risk factor is that you are alone on stage...You have to take all the responsibility...It's your ass, basically, up on the line.

This fear of standup takes time to dissipate, never quite disappearing completely. Pros who have bouts with stage fright maintain, as do established actors and singers, that nervous energy is essential - it gives their performance that added sense of urgency and momentum. There is, however, a noticeable difference between the twinge of nervousness felt by the pro and the sheer terror facing the novice.

The question then becomes, if the very thought of standup is so terrifying, how does this negative emotion get translated into more positive terms, that is, in the recognition that stage fright is merely unchannelled energy? To say it is a matter of

experience is only part of the answer. To flesh out a response, we can turn to an analogous situation illustrated by Becker (1963) in his study of marijuana users. His basic premise is that in and of itself, smoking marijuana does not produce pleasurable sensations. In fact, for first time users, the opposite may occur: they feel either no effects or decidedly unpleasant ones. They must learn not only to smoke properly so as to "get high", but to interpret the drug's effects as positive ones if they are to become consistent marijuana users. How does this transformation of meaning, where an individual's concept changes from earlier notions coloured by fear, unfamiliarity and uncertainty, to a new conception of the drug as producing pleasurable sensations, occur? This is where the notion of group behaviour and interaction is useful. Learning to enjoy marijuana is a process. The novice associates with steady users who offer explanations, reassurances and reinterpretations of what he or she is actually experiencing, and in this way, learns in the company of others to enjoy what may not be inherently pleasurable.

Can an amateur standup comic who takes the stage for the first time be compared to a first time marijuana user? Yes and no. Yes because both approach their tasks with hesitation based upon the fear of possibly negative consequences. Just as the smoker may experience frightening physical reactions, the amateur comic may not get any laughs. For both, the experience can be painful, but chances are, despite this setback, they will return for more. The smoker has the reassurance of fellow smokers that being high is a fun state which takes practice to achieve. The comic may or may not get similar reassurances and this is where the similarity between the first time smoker and comedian ends. Most neophytes to comedy, especially women, left to flounder on their own, do not enjoy institutional support. To be sure, they must, as Becker suggested, reinterpret the performing experience as an inherently pleasurable one, but, aside from occasional advice from pros and the comforting sounds of laughter,

this is an internal process as they gradually notice improvements in their technique and delivery.

However, the key point remains: in order for a novice to continue performing comedy, she must be able to transform her initial fear into a genuine enjoyment of standup. Once she has done so, she can commit herself to a comedy career, starting at the beginning. We will now discuss these stages.

CAREER STAGES

Initial exposure to any occupation is no guarantee that the novice will remain in the field. In order for the comic to continue doing standup, certain conditions must be met, not the least of which is the belief that she is qualified for this work. Moreover, any number of incidents along her career path may convince her to bail out and seek other work. This, however, begs the larger question: is there a typical career path comics follow on the road to success?

The answer to this question can, at best, be a qualified yes. There are definite steps involved within a comedy club like Yuk Yuk's, but it is important to recognize the larger picture: this club (and the club scene in general) is only one medium within a vast entertainment field. For most of the women interviewed, allegiance to a club is a calculated venture which does not last beyond several years. It is a training ground, a vehicle, but rarely a pinnacle. Moreover, not all comics choose the club route. Some prefer to work as improv actresses or perform for community functions and venues such as colleges and lodges. Bearing these variations in mind, it is still possible to draw a scheme of the various stages in a comic's career. In brief, these are: 1)the amateur

2)the professional
3)branching out
4)fame and greater control over one's career.

In an article on actors' careers, Layder (1984) points out that since at least 80% of actors only work at their craft for a limited time period and on a contractual basis, "career commitment has to be understood in terms of commitment to an occupational status system rather than to a specific organizational system" (1984:150). The nature of the performing industry itself results in frequently interrupted and uneven career lines. Moreover, careers are largely determined by market forces beyond actors' control and even the most successful go through long periods of unemployment (ibid:155). It becomes difficult to measure success since there is no typical career ladder.

Given that comics face very similar career problems, it is important to note that while movement through each stage depends upon individual effort and ability, social factors above and beyond the individual affect her chances. These contingencies include relationships with club owners and managers, her status in the eyes of the public and the vicissitudes of the entertainment market. Actors face similar strains (Layder, 1984:155). There are fads in comedy just like in fashion and a style that is "in" this year may prove highly unpopular the next. To give just one example, the deadpan wit of Steven Wright and the sarcastic cynicism of David Letterman are currently in vogue, while physical slapstick by the likes of Jerry Lewis is no longer popular. Success then, is not just a matter of one's talent and creativity, but other forces beyond one's immediate control. Hence the expression, "I got a lucky break."

The first step, of course, is the initial entry into the world of comedy. As we have seen, before the novice can go on stage a fourth, fifth and six time, she must be able to define the experience as a pleasurable one, or, at the very least, one which will bring certain rewards. If she has come this far and enjoys the positive response, she will soon not only commit herself to doing standup, but also refer to herself as an amateur comic.

COMMITMENT

The notion of commitment, while easy enough to grasp, has, as Becker (1960) illustrates, been misunderstood. To leave it in the psyche of the individual, attributing it to her unconscious needs and motivation is, for the sociologist, an unsatisfactory explanation. To define commitment as a line of consistent activity and behaviour is, in effect, tautological, for it does not explain the actual process involved. Why, though, should we be concerned with a precise definition of the term? Simply because the way we use it, as opposed to calling behaviour a "decision" or "choice", is implicitly value laden. A commitment is serious, time-consuming, all-embracing, often a matter of principle. How then, can we explain this process in sociological terms? Becker defines it as "the specific mechanism of constraint of behaviour through previously placed side bets" (1960:40). In making a commitment to a specific course of action, we must take into account other interests and options which, ordinarily, would have nothing to do with this particular behaviour. The concept here is of a willingness to sacrifice certain things in one's commitment to something else, of "staking originally extraneous interests on following a consistent line of activity" (ibid). Furthermore, the individual, as a social actor, is fully aware that following one course of action has ramifications in other previously unrelated areas of her life.

This latter point, in turn, brings the social element of commitment into play. As Becker explains, side bets are often not of the individual's own making, but presented to her by social institutions. A prime example of this is cultural expectations which, if disregarded, may lead to sanctions for the individual.

How does this notion of side bets relate to a woman's commitment to standup comedy? Comediennes too are victims of cultural expectations. In their case, these are reflected in their parents wishes. As young women, they are expected to choose

respectable careers where they can support themselves until they find a husband. In committing themselves to comedy, these women are violating parental norms. Since solid relationships are of value to them, the side bet in their career choice is loss of parental support. (We will deal with this more fully in a later section of this chapter.) In addition, most women who are committed to standup comedy discover that this involvement puts them at a serious disadvantage in their love relationships with men. As we have seen in earlier chapters, men feel threatened by funny women. The literature on female comics (sparse as it is) is replete with assertions from single and divorced women documenting how their success as comics is partly to blame for shaky, volatile relationships with men (see Martin and Segrave, 1986).

The nature and importance of committment was brought up by only one of the comediennes interviewed. A pro who has been working in comedy for a few years, she fears she is not yet willing to make a total commitment, recognizing its price:

> That's another reason why I don't try as hard as I should or I don't work as much as I should, because I'm also pursuing things that will make me happy aside from comedy. Maybe you have to be a selfless kind of creature who can throw all those things aside, who can make those grand sacrifices.

The commitment to comedy is a serious one and it does have its costs. Let us now examine more closely one of these costs: parental disapproval.

PARENTAL SUPPORT

For most women, deciding to go into comedy turned out to be half the battle. The other half, an ongoing struggle for some, was justifying this choice. Few parents are overjoyed when their bright, attractive, wonderful daughter announces, "Mom, I wanna be a standup comedienne."

The comics interviewed appreciate this loving concern, understanding its basis in the harsh realities of the comic's lifestyle. The constant travelling, staying overnight in hotels in strange cities, the late hours, are not pleasant, either for men or for women. One pro who completed a successful run in San Francisco flew back home because she missed her family and friends. Loneliness was her only companion. Another negative factor of a comic's life are the "dives" in which, of necessity, they are forced to perform. These clubs are characterized by excessive drinking, machismo and rowdy behaviour. If this reality does not sit well with comediennes, it is a constant source of anxiety for their parents. Moreover, as in other performing arts, success in the field of comedy comes along only rarely, leaving behind thousands of hopefuls and "also-rans". Given that it is in the nature of parents to want what they subjectively define as "the best" for their children, the comics interviewed were not surprised by their parents' staunch resistance to their chosen profession.

However, to understand something intellectually does not make it any easier to accept emotionally. By and large, the comediennes interviewed spoke wistfully about this lack of parental support. One pro describes her family as very conservative and relates:

> When I actually told them I had registered for Fine Arts they were devastated. They had decided at an early age that I should be married at around 20...[They] couldn't help but feel cheated, that I had turned on them...I work in an office during the day and they thank God that maybe one day I'll stay with an office and forget about comedy...It hurts when your family doesn't want you to do what you're doing. But I love it so much.

Other comediennes have felt the same pain, hurt by their parents' rejection of their dreams. For them, at least in the early stages, comedy is not merely a job or even a career, but a labour of love. They regret being unable to share their victories and disappointments with parents who have no understanding of the field. One improv

actress describes her parents as conservative people who, because they follow the customs of their native country, have nothing but contempt for acting. She recalls their reaction when she chose to major in Theatre Arts:

> They weren't too happy about it. Even now, I've gotten a few little successes for myself and all they're interested in is, as long as I make money and can support myself, that's fine...When I get a temp job in the offices they are so much more overjoyed than when I get a big break.

Even success on a larger scale may do little to assuage the disappointment felt by some parents. One successful pro told me her mother had phoned recently to suggest she take a course to become a real estate agent. She herself has been a performer for many years and recalls:

> When I started this career of mine they said, 'No, I don't think so. Just make sure you go to school and you get a career and you find something to fall back on if you do want to pursue this thing.'

Clearly, with few exceptions, parents did not support their daughters' decisions to become comediennes. When they enter the field here in Canada, women face, if not outright hostility, very little institutional support. Given this isolation, to whom, in their personal lives could they turn during those difficult times when they were overwhelmed by a helpless sense of failure and incompetence? Fortunately, many did find support, comfort and unconditional acceptance from other sources, primarily friends. The highly successful pro whose parents urged her to finish her education acknowledges her debt to a lifelong friend who was always available to her:

> I wouldn't have done any of this without her. Because she went with me every night. Because I didn't want to go to these places alone, they were terrible places.

The importance of this friendship took on even greater significance a few years later when, discouraged by her lack of career mobility, she quit standup comedy. Her friend tricked her into performing at a new club and after that:

> I never stopped again. Because she did that...Because I knew she believed in me.

It should be noted that while standup comediennes in the clubs are isolated to a degree, they did, at some point in their involvement with performing, receive both verification of their talents and support for their ambition. (Unfortunately, this encouragement offered during their involvement with theatre virtually disappeared once they jumped ship to professional comedy). Nevertheless, without some sort of institutional support in their early performing days, they would have never considered a performance career (let alone their eventual switch to comedy). One comic recounts how only the support of a teacher helped her make it past high school drama:

> I almost failed my second year drama and I was ready to give it up. I thought, 'I gotta give it up. No,no,no, I've gotta go into science.' So the teacher talked me into, 'Stay, I think you've got something.' So I stayed on.

She considers herself fortunate that several years later, when faced with doubts and parental disapproval over her decision to become a theatrical actress, she found a great deal of institutional support which "made me rise":

> Thankfully I was involved with a theatre company who were extremely supportive of me and just loved me to bits. So I got a lot of exposure. I did some T.V. bits and some movies, and I was on the radio, the whole bit. So that was real nice.

Long before they enter comedy, their creative talents, ambition and motivation are nurtured and nourished within supportive theatrical subcultures which, because they are "in the know" when it comes to performing, are an important source of

validation for the performer. One pro comic claims she would have given up early on if not for the advice of her father, who used to be a comedian:

> My Dad said, 'I understand, it's a really weird business to be in, but do it the next night. Do it.'

Once again, it is important to recognize that any support accorded to most of the women interviewed was offered before their switch into comedy from regular theatre. As we saw in Chapter 3, institutional support from club owners and managers is rarely forthcoming. In addition, most parents did not support their daughters' career ambitions in both theatre and comedy. However, there were a few exceptions to this rule, including the comic who was following in her father's footsteps and the woman whose mother actually suggested she investigate the possibility of becoming a standup comic. While reactions differed in each case, it was clear that comics longed for parental approval, although some have given up hoping it will be forthcoming. Moreover, encouragement and emotional support form loved ones, be they parents, friends or peers, is crucial in maintaining their optimism , self-esteem, commitment and faith in their ability to succeed in the competitive field of comedy.

Despite the obvious disapproval of those around them, these women forged ahead into what was often unknown territory. A brief testing of the waters was usually all it took to convince them that nothing made them feel as alive as performing comedy. This "high" with its undeniably mystical quality, is difficult to translate into words. It is neither tangible nor quantifiable, but real nevertheless. To understand it is to begin to grasp why these women got hooked on performing. One improv actress recalls the exact town and play in which she was performing when this lifelong addiction began:

> The first one I did I had one funny line and it's like a drug.

If comedy is an addiction, it can only be supported by further indulgence in the habit. The route one takes to achieve success may be cluttered and there are no hard and fast rules. We shall now follow some of these women from their initial entry into comedy to their current positions and their own assessment of how far they've come.

THE AMATEUR

The first stage of any career involves the initial entry and comics in this stage are classified as amateurs. With few exceptions, the women came to comedy with varying degrees of theatrical training, both in serious and comic roles. Nevertheless, for the most part, they perceive their entry into the unfamiliar world of standup comedy as purely accidental. Aside from being humourous, some of these stories border on the bizarre. One woman relates how she began on the advice of a psychic who claimed this was her destiny. She, however, did not take the news well:

> I just suddenly started doing it...I was real upset when she told me I was bound to be a comedian because I didn't wanna be one at all. I cried all the way home.

Another woman, having just graduated from a theatre arts program, responded to an advertisement for comics to perform in a lounge at a gay disco. In order to be able to go through with it, she consumed massive quantities of alcohol before her first performance. One improv actress never intended to get involved in performing:

> I fell into taking workshops at Second City by filling out the wrong application form.

While the above quotes indicate purely accidental entries into comedy, for many others, their first tentative steps into the field were an extension of their involvement in theatre. As one comic recalls:

> It just happened. One day on my lunch hour I just walked around on stage for about fifteen minutes just blabbering to myself like an idiot and then bang! I had my first routine.

An improv actress who discovered her talent for improvisation thanks to a director who before play rehearsals insisted that the cast do improv skits admits, "I basically slipped into comedy."

Although theatre seems to be the most natural location for an awareness of comedy to be awakened and nurtured, it is by no means the only place where this discovery is made. In reading the autobiographies of prominent comedians, one is struck by how many of them began their performing careers as musicians and/or singers. (While this is especially true of comics who began in vaudeville, it was also the case for more modern day stars such as Carol Burnet.) This, however, was the case for only one of the comics in this sample, a pro who has been in the business for many years:

> When I started I was playing guitar, funny songs, and the introductions of the songs made them laugh. That's when I realized just me talking made people laugh much more than the singing...That's how it evolved. And so I wasn't sitting on a stool anymore, I was standing up, with a guitar for the first ten minutes, for the next thirty it was standup.

There are, of course, exceptions to this general pattern of women entering comedy from a solid performing arts background. One woman had little theatre training aside from a few Second City workshops. She did, however, have a strong desire to perform and spent many weeks as an observer in the audience at Yuk Yuk's amateur nights:

> I thought, 'God, you don't even have to be funny to do amateur night, you just have to have courage.' I got that. And it just so happened I had talent as well.

Two others began on amateur nights as well, as a result of suggestions and encouragement from friends (again, the social validation of their talent). Skeptical at

first, they finally took the stage, did very well and, feeling the high that comes from making people laugh, became addicted to standup comedy.

The stories of these women are a unique part of their biographies. Yet there is a common theme which unites their experiences: their perception of an accidental entry into the terrifying world of standup.

But were these entries truly as accidental as they appear? Allow me to detour for a moment with a personal recollection. Initially, I too looked upon my foray into comedy as accidental; on a whim, I decided to take a workshop. Yet, the thought would not have occurred to me unless I believed I had potential. How did I come to this belief? Most of my life, all sorts of people, from close friends to acquaintances to brief encounters, kept telling me, "You're funny." Quite a few of them added, "You should do something with it." Thus, in a sense, my "whim" was not a whim at all; rather, it was an accumulation of various types of supportive comments made to me in the context of social interaction. This then, is the key point: in sociological terms, ambition, the very motivation to do something and do it well, is not merely the product of an individual's psyche. As Oswald Hall (1948) points out in "The Stages Of A Medical Career", the ambition to be a doctor has a definite social base. Having been nourished and encouraged by family and friends, this particular ambition grew in proportion to the informal support it received.

Occupational choices are not made in a vacuum. The fact that most standup comics interviewed had strong theatre backgrounds indicates an involvement with performers. Some who had only taken a few workshops or acting classes may have stood on the periphery, while others who majored in Fine Arts were seeped in the world of theatre. Almost all, prior to their entry into standup comedy, had varying degrees of involvement with performers. This is an important factor, because as Prus (1980) demonstrates in Hookers, Rounders and Desk Clerks :

> Initial involvement can be understood only in the context of the larger subcultural setting in which the prospective novice finds herself (1980:26).

Many hookers, for example, first joined the hotel community as strippers, waitresses or bar patrons and through contact with prostitutes, became interested in exploring this occupational possibility. Prus refers to this contact as a career contingency which he defines as, "the situational elements affecting entrance, continuity and disinvolvement from a particular activity" (ibid). In the case of strippers, these women came from a variety of occupations, including modelling and waitressing, getting into stripping as a result of contacts with strippers who sparked their initial interest and gave them tips and encouragement. Of course, few ever follow up these initial enquiries with actual entry into the field. This too depends on other contingencies, such as dissatisfaction with their other jobs, which make stripping a viable, attractive option (ibid:105).

When consideration is given to the comediennes interviewed, we see that similar contingencies were in effect. In their involvement in theatre, it was almost inevitable that they be exposed to comic performing. Once this did happen, most women discovered their aptitude for and enjoyment of comedy. We can explain the entry of those who were not theatre majors by examining other career contingencies. For instance, one pro found herself disillusioned with both university and the desk job route:

> When I was in school I realized that I just couldn't work the way other people work. I couldn't sit at a desk and do that. I've done it. I went through university, I did the four years, I considered going on and I thought, 'This [entertainment] has always been a dream. I might as well.'

The amateur who entered comedy on the advice of a psychic was unemployed at the time of the interview and added as an afterthought:

> Then I thought, well, I have a sort of performing type personality. I think I would be sad if I didn't perform in my life - I stand out in a crowd.

As Prus (1980) clearly illustrates, there are many situational elements affecting one's occupational staying power. For instance, in order for a hooker to gain acceptance in the hotel community, she must obey its rules. Insofar as the activity takes place in a hotel, it is not just a private matter between the hooker and her client. Comedians face an analogous situation since a performance does not just involve a comic and an audience. There must be a venue in which this performance takes place, just as there are people whose jobs involve facilitating the arrangements whereby audiences and comics are brought together.

Basically, entry and success for a comic are contingent not only upon her talent and effort, but on how well she functions in fairly complicated systems of interaction. Good working relationships with a variety of individuals, especially those who can affect her chances at key auditions and the like, are essential. It is axiomatic in many professions that who you know is often as important as how good you are. Many comics accept this fact of life, as one male comic explains:

> Yes, contacts are very important. The thing is, it doesn't matter what business you're in when you're talking about contacts, it's not who you know, it's what the people who you know think of you.

The corollary of this is the necessity to be nice to the "right" people. Again, most comics accept this but a few are not able to do so. One comic talks about her frustration in this regard:

> It's weird but if you say nice things to important people, they're gonna do things for you. It's a fact of life but you gotta do it. And I'm not ready to kiss ass and I won't. I'm gonna let my work speak for itself...

We have already seen how female comics encounter a vast array of problems in their dealings with less than sympathetic management. The point to be kept in mind here is that throughout her career, the comic will be faced with outside factors affecting her professional development.

None of this is necessarily apparent to the novice who, in the first stage of her comedy career, is beset by anxiety and uncertainty. Criticism, though constructive, is frequent. An amateur resigns herself to these necessary doubts, as the following quote makes clear:

> My worst fear is...people would see me as the amateur that I am and judge me right then and there. Which of course has to happen with anything...So I imagine you have to go through this period of awkwardness before you can do something gracefully and I sort of find that a little uncomfortable, like people can see me tripping and stumbling around.

The amateur stage, characterized by this awkwardness, is also where a potential comic learns the value of hard work. It is here that her talent receives validation. Having made the initial entry and commitment to comedy, she must devote time and energy to learning and refining various techniques, a task which will continue throughout her entire career. Thus, the committed beginner, although an amateur in terms of skill and expertise, exhibits a highly professional attitude towards her work.

As Stebbins (1979) points out, the main difference between professionals and amateurs is a matter of degree. Due to greater experience, professionals exhibit more confidence and perseverance and tend to be better prepared (1979:38-40). By contrast, amateurs are more insecure, perhaps more easily discouraged by setbacks and less equipped to deal with the unfamiliar. Keeping these basic differences in mind, let us now turn to the second stage in a typical comedy career: the professional.

PROFESSIONAL STAGE

What happens to the amateur who believes she has improved to the point where she is ready to shed her novice status? In Canada, if she chooses to align herself with a particular comedy club and if she is talented, chances are she will be promoted to professional status. Along with this ego-boosting, gratifying change in status, come the first real tangible benefits. As a pro, she not only receives a salary, but also a guarantee of much needed exposure and stage time which, in turn, leads to some measure of recognition. Within the status of professional, there is a hierarchy as well. The pro works her way from opening act where she earns around $200 per weekend gig, to middle act to headliner (also called feature). The criteria for promotion include one's overall development or "readiness", and the length of one's routine. An opener needs at least a twenty minute set, a middle requires 35-40 minutes and a headliner must have at least 60 minutes of solid material. A third criterion for promotion, popularity, is not nearly as objective as the others. Technically, this is judged by audience tastes. A comic who is requested frequently by the public will probably be promoted more quickly. Yuk Yuk's also uses a laugh ratio, judging the calibre of one's routine by whether or not there is at least one laugh every 15-20 seconds. In practice, as was intimated by a few comics, an assessment of one's popularity is subject to the whims of whoever is doing the promoting.

Most of the women interviewed for this study rose through the ranks fairly quickly. On average, they had been doing amateur nights at Yuk Yuk's for no more than six months at the time of their promotion. This comics' story is typical:

> I did it [amateur nights] for a couple of months, on and off. Because I had another job then, a desk job...And I guess I did it about a week before they said, 'O.K. We'll give you some regular nights now.'

At Yuk Yuk's, if the director of talent development spots someone whom he believes shows potential, he or she will be asked to perform once a week, strictly on amateur nights. Novices use this valuable stage time to perfect their technique in preparation for the all-important showcases. Held every four months and attended by the talent director and club founder/owner, the showcase is an opportunity for the best amateurs to show their stuff. Participation is by invitation only and out of this group of hopefuls, a few are chosen to be regulars. Thus, in effect, they are hired as opening acts.

The female pros at Yuk Yuk's seem to have been swiftly promoted from amateur to professional status. Two explain:

> It was quick but I had an advantage because I am a woman. 'Hey, we got a funny one. Bang, let's go!' They might even have wanted me to come up sooner but I just didn't feel ready.

> [They] could not believe what I was able to offer. On and on and wonderful things they said to me: 'We're looking for that one girl, one strong girl'...And they made it sound like I was the guinea pig [emphasis mine].

The above quotes are easily interpreted as a vote of support from management, who obviously decided to hire female comics. However, it must also be noted that at the time of the interviews, none of the "club-aligned" women had the coveted status of feature act. Having been allowed into the ranks of professional comics, they were then left alone.

Despite this lack of movement, their passage from amateur to professional status was swift. One would assume these women would be very pleased with their progress. Indeed, many of them are, although they guard against egotism and complacency as one pro explains:

> I've only been at it a short time, I'm doing well and I intend to keep getting better and better at it. And the only way that's gonna happen is if I work really hard.

Most women expressed pride in their accomplishments but this did not always translate into career satisfaction. A few of them feel a sense of restlessness and uneasiness:

> I guess at the stage I'm at...I should be happy but you can never really be happy, you've always gotta wanna do more, want it to be better and I certainly want that so I'm not happy with what I've got. I know it'll make people laugh but I want something clever.

This distress plagues those women who have been performing for a number of years and despite their pro status, feel discouraged by the lack of opportunity in Canada. One of these women who has had a career as an actress and a playwright is unhappy with her current situation and setting her sights towards the States. In fact, she began performing comedy a few years ago when she arrived in Los Angeles, seeking fame:

> I seriously had visions of stars. I was gonna go down there and gee, I was so perky and God, nothing could stop me. I think probably my naivete got me through the whole thing. But it slapped me around a little bit. I learned a lot.

Although it does offer a certain degree of security and for the comic, the comforting sense that she is "on the way up", movement into the professional stage does not eradicate all her doubts and anxiety. Feelings of satisfaction are mixed with the determination to improve and this stage is characterized by hard work, until the pro believes she is ready to take the next step.

In this sense, her situation is parallel to ones faced by many professionals in other careers.

BRANCHING OUT

The third stage in a typical comedy career, exploring other possibilities, is one which may sound contradictory. After all, the comic who is a club pro has invested a great deal of time, effort and training to attain her professional status and secure employment. Why would she want to jeopardize her coveted position? To understand this, it is necessary to examine the meaning of creativity. It would be a mistake to assume that due to their special gifts, performers do not operate within a social system of sorts. By the same token, our understanding of comedy as an occupation is weakened if we ignore the unique circumstances surrounding the performer. Like any artist, most comics are strongly committed to their own creative standards. This means they are constantly exploring other possibilities for creative expression. For instance, in his study of musicians, Becker (1963) discovered what for them is a painful conflict between their desire for free self-expression and the realization that in order to get paid, they must play what the audience wants to hear. Musicians are always on the lookout for jobs which will allow them more creative freedom. In addition, success in the music business is defined not by sticking with one employer, but by the frequency with which one changes jobs. The key then, is variety and exposure. Comics who long for varied careers and have already established favourable professional reputations begin moving away from the safe cocoon of the club. With the security of a higher profile and recognition within the artistic community in which she operates, the confident pro begins to branch out. This process includes diverse elements such as trying her hand at writing and/or acting, finding an agent and moving into other mediums such as film and television, and freelancing.

Cutting the cord at Yuk Yuk's and offering one's comedy services elsewhere is

the most obvious way for a comic to indicate her readiness to move on. A male "defector" from this particular club who has since worked a variety of circuits explains:

> For the most part, those of us who don't go through Yuk Yuk's usually make more money because we're the ones who, not to pat ourselves on the back, are good enough to get work outside of the womb, so to speak.

The comics interviewed for this study who work at Yuk Yuk's are, at the same time, covering their bases elsewhere. A few still do improv, while others are trying to find agents. All expressed the desire for a greater variety of experiences, performing as many gigs in as many types of venues and mediums as possible.

Thus far, we have been examining the careers of comics aligned with clubs. For comics who are specifically feminist in their orientation and do "freelance" comedy, there is an even greater lack of clearcut stages, although a typical career pattern does emerge. Successful performers move from being amateurs to classifying themselves as professionals. The most visible proof of this change in status occurs when they are paid for performing comedy. This happens to comediennes who are paid for performing at private functions or community events, and who have a large enough profile within the performing community to be considered for the role when performing opportunities arise. Thus, the main symbols of professional status are twofold: financial return and recognition.

Typically, the feminist standups interviewed came to the performing field through their involvement with theatre. After completing improv workshops, one woman was hired by Second City's touring company. A spontaneous game of improv at a party led to a job as a puppeteer for a CBC children's show. She soon discovered that puppeteering was an enjoyable, challenging outlet for her creativity and humour. She is currently working on a one-woman show to be performed at a theatre congress next spring. She also performs in clubs which offer weekly comedy nights. Another comic

has, for the past few years, written and performed solo pieces, mostly at feminist conferences. Since her humour is community oriented, her audiences are usually supportive, appreciating her efforts. Whereas at first she approached organizations requesting permission to perform, recently they have sought after her talent. This is a prime example of the importance of exposure and a high performing profile.

FAME

Depending on how successful she is, a comic may or may not reach the fourth stage: that of larger scale recognition, fame and a greater degree of control over her career options. Here too, she must continue to branch out.

Bearing in mind the low profile and visibility of comedy in this country, achieving fame as a comic is virtually impossible. One pro interviewed does get recognized on the street but this is due more to her many radio and television appearances. Her first love is comedy and she is known in the business as an excellent standup comic, one of the country's best. For her too, success involved an arduous, uphill climb. She began performing at night while completing high school and attending college in an era where comedy clubs per se did not exist. Having no agent, she promoted herself, offering her services at clubs that provided public entertainment. After several years of this, during which she singlehandedly made a name for herself, she found an agent and won acting jobs in radio, film and television. Recently her career has taken another twist when she was sought out by an ardent admirer who is currently a standup comic and wishes to learn the tricks of the trade from one of the best. Her persistence and perseverance eventually paid off:

> There was a certain point in my career when I was playing so steadily and there were many clubs and nobody was afraid of Yuk Yuk's, all

> they had to do was advertise my name and they'd have an audience full of my followers.

Women who enter the field of comedy know that there are no guarantees but believe that hard work will eventually pay off. All the women interviewed pointed out that they were willing to pay their dues. An American pro describes this often painful process:

> You do a ten minute bit in this hole in the wall for free and you have to sit through the singers. I did a place called the 'Piano Bar' and people would get up and sing 'Memories' from 'Cats' for five hours. You put your name on a cocktail napkin in a brandy snifter and then if he [emcee] felt like it he put you on...I started working out at the 'Improvisation' in New York going on at 3 o'clock in the morning when there's five people left, two who are functional.

A few issues are worth repeating and bear closer scrutiny. First of all, few comics reach this last stage, nor do all comics express the desire to do so, a fact which is connected to their personal goals (which we shall examine in detail later). Secondly, while promotion to higher stages is a result of hard work, chance and likability, there is one constant throughout a performer's career: the necessity of continuous developing, reviewing and perfecting. Finally, because the comedy club is only one vehicle for career development, a comic's progress within the club must be viewed in the context of the larger entertainment field. Not all comics' careers will fit into the stages delineated thus far. It is, however, very rare to jump form amateur status to instant fame. Every comic (male and female) must work at expanding and maintaining his or her reputation.

Most comics interviewed admit that the struggle of the early years was an instructive period where they learned some invaluable lessons, not the least of which was patience. Currently working hard in their present capacities, they envision an even brighter future. In fact, it is this vision which carried them through the bleaker

periods. This next section will examine their perceptions of their future, taking a closer look at their career goals and what they perceive to be the rewards of doing comedy.

REWARDS

No career choice brings complete satisfaction and comedy is no exception to this rule. Indeed, we have seen how the risks, loneliness, isolation and potential for humiliation make comedy a difficult career choice. Presumably, those who stick with it believe the heavy costs will be outweighed by worthwhile rewards.

What are the rewards of doing comedy? Again, unlike other professions, they are rarely monetary ones, unless one is fortunate enough to "make it big", and even so, this can take many years. Fame, as glamourized by the media, may be a powerful motivater for some. Yet, here in Canada, fame is a non-issue. In any case, most of the female comics interviewed mentioned it only in passing. They spoke of other rewards in more emotional, spiritual, quasi-mystical terms.

By far, the greatest and, coincidentally, the simplest reward of doing comedy is making people laugh. On this point there was unanimous, enthusiastic agreement:

> It's fun...Especially when it clicks.
>
> When you're up there and you're doing something that you find interesting and they find it funny, that's as much of a joy as anything you can get. It's mass appreciation. That's what carries you through.

This last comment clarifies why these rewards are so crucial. Since the truly successful evenings can be few and far between, it is the memory of those thrilling moments, the roar of the crowd, which sustain comics through frequent failed performances and lackluster responses. One pro recalls her first standing ovation:

> I was almost in tears of delight because they were standing up chanting my name...I went back out there and they got on their feet and I did some more stuff and they just loved it. It was incredible.

Thus, while making people laugh is a reward in itself, receiving this type of mass appreciation, these accolades, is perhaps the greatest thrill imaginable. Again, these comics speak of rewards in more spiritual terms, comparing themselves to doctors, emotional healers whose job it is to take away pain, if only momentarily. One comic delights in this feeling:

> It's knowing that I have shared something very special and very personal with an audience and I made them feel happy...If you can make them forget about their mortgage payment or their divorce for half an hour or however long and just make them laugh at something, I've done my job and that makes me good.

There is an interesting contradiction in the above quote: this performer displays a great deal of idealism and yet, considers comedy a job. Does the idealism felt by the novice wane after hard knocks with reality? Do other comics consider performing to be a job like any other? There is no consensus on these questions as the following quotes illustrate:

> I think it's a little more basic than a lot of people realize, and I'm not saying it's a job like you put on your coveralls and go do comedy, but this is what you do...it's just something you have a knack for...It's just something that you happen to be good at...
>
> It changes from day to day or job to job. Because one night it's just great and you're having the time of your life and the next day it just turns to garbage...and then you could do a show an hour later and the audience is great again and all of a sudden this is a great business.
>
> At the beginning you're idealistic. I'm not anymore...It's really hard because you do a whole batch of things that aren't great and you forget all those good moments and you have to kind of remember them.

Comics do remember those special thrills. One comic remembers the first piece

she performed, how profoundly the audience's response affected her and how rewarding this was:

> I was really awed that the audience responded. And I could make them laugh and I could make them cry. And that was the greatest high, to feel that kind of response...Even after I finished they kept laughing. That was incredible.

Incredible. It is this word which explains why comics keep working despite painful setbacks - making people laugh is an incredible feeling. In a sense, this reward is the goal of almost every performance. To be sure, comics have long term goals as well and in the next section we shall examine just what some of these goals are.

GOALS

Comics, regardless of their special gifts, are neither demigods nor saviours. Fully aware of the limitations of their craft, they are basically ambitious people who wish to rise to the upper echelons of the comedy field. Thus, while the short term goal is to create laughter and win over each audience, and while this is a rewarding task, all comics keep in mind their ultimate goals. For some this is indeed fame, to "make it big". For others who view fame with disdain, the goal is recognition on a smaller scale and the opportunity for freer creative expression.

The comediennes interviewed inevitably discussed their careers in terms of the prospects or lack thereof, in Canada. Despite, as we saw in Chapter 3, a much expanded field and the current popularity of standup, many feel Canada offers limited opportunities for advancement. This assessment explains why most of them regard comedy as the gateway to hopefully more lucrative careers in film and television. (It is these goals which propel them through the stages in their careers and fuel their need

to branch out.) Some express the desire for large scale fame in the U.S. while others are in the process of looking for acting agents. This is how they answered questions about their goals:

> I don't wanna do standup forever. I don't wanna work on the road forever. I wanna get involved in acting.
>
> I would like to be writing for sure and performing my standup. I'm talking within the top five in North America...This is really my training ground. I can fuck up as much as I want up here and it doesn't matter 'cause no one's gonna see me...But the market is down [U.S.] and I gotta go.
>
> [The goal is] to be so good that you'll be noticed, that you'll become famous. I wanna be doing talk shows and doing real well and I wouldn't mind being on T.V. I'd love to have a sitcom but I could also see myself writing for one instead.

It is interesting to note that this approach is not limited to Canadians. An American comic who hopes to break into film believes comedy sets her apart because, "there are hundreds of pretty actresses in New York."

The comics quoted above are still trying to make a name for themselves, establishing their professional reputations. What about the goals of successful performers, those currently in stages three and four? Although the three comics interviewed who belong to this category expressed satisfaction with their success, they were open to new challenges. For instance, when I interviewed a comic with high visibility in her native Australia, she was very excited about an offer she had just received to headline for a week at the Improvisation. Unfamiliar with the names and relative status of New York clubs, she asked me, "Is that good?"

Not all comics exhibit the desire for large scale recognition, a factor which is related to their own motivation for performing. Two of the women interviewed shun mainstream comedy and their goals, which are more oriented to servicing their

community, reflect this. Improv actresses can also be content with less than mega fame. Here is what they have to say about their goals:

> In five years from now I will be well known in my community and I would like my community to allow me to do a film.
>
> I am fairly ambitious but I think as long as I can keep working I'll be happy...I have been writing as well. Eventually I'd like to produce some of the stuff I'm writing, maybe mount it and then see.

The overall goal varies from comic to comic, but most express the desire to taste life beyond the clubs by branching out into other mediums and trying their hands at acting, writing and producing. This is a result both of the realities of the club situation and the limited opportunities it offers, and the creative impulse which fuels most comics.

In a sense, rewards and goals are two sides of the same coin, each reinforcing the other. Yet, as has been mentioned previously, the disappointments, especially in the early years, far outweigh the thrills. Comics know intuitively that unless they keep these disappointments in perspective, they will quit long before their goals are even remotely attainable. One of the first painful lessons comics must learn is how to deal with failure. This will be discussed in the following section.

DEALING WITH FAILURE

The spectre of failure hovers over the amateur comic, but even the pro is not above the occasional failed performance. The most successful pros can sometimes vividly remember their first "bomb". Unfortunately, not only do comics take the stage alone and therefore, the responsibility for failure rests on their shoulders, they also learn how to cope alone. Although each developed strategies for dealing with failure, their coping

mechanisms and rationalizations were remarkably similar. But failure can still be devastating, as is evident in the following story told by an American pro:

> I had one night, it was only about a year ago, when I literally wanted to run outside and get hit by a truck. I went on to absolute silence. DEAD silence. And people started hissing me...And I wanted to kill myself.

Given that she had been performing for three years when this incident occurred, this was by no means her first bomb, nor would it be her last. Yet, it was still devastating. Although I had assumed the first bomb is always traumatic, several comediennes could not even recall it. In the following comments, a few comics outline their reactions to and rationalizations of their failures, from earlier ones which they brush off, to subsequent and current ones which are much more demoralizing:

> You expect to bomb at first.
>
> For your first bomb you think, 'Well, I've only been doing it for a couple of months...Once you come to expect a certain level of yourself and you don't do well, that's when you get upset. Not that first time.
>
> You gotta cope. If you can make it through these times, you know you're gonna make it.

Most of the comics take failure very personally, claiming full responsibility for what, to an objective outsider, may appear due to other factors. For example, audiences are notoriously fickle, hence the expression, "It was a bad audience." It is entirely possible at times that the performance itself was not a failure. Some of the comics interviewed do take this into account. The pro who talked about expecting a certain level of herself adds that if she knows she has performed well, regardless of a lukewarm response, she is satisfied. However:

> It's when I do bad, even when the crowd likes me, that I consider it a bomb. That's when I think I haven't done well - when I don't like it.

For all those comics who can be philosophical and stoic after their first bomb, there are twice as many who agonize over this initial brush with failure. A comic and improv actress describe the anguish they felt and the fear of trying again:

> When I first started specifically, it was devastating...I remember those first times boy, it's like, 'No, I am stupid to go out on that stage again. They're gonna eat me up, it's like feeding time at the shark pool.'
>
> The first time it was very depressing...It's like, 'Well, I'm not going back on stage again.' That's your attitude.

Many comics cannot help but internalize both failure and the blame for it, even when, like improv actresses, they work as part of a team:

> Even though it's an even thing where everyone in the scene takes equal responsibility for it, there's still that feeling, 'Well, if I hadn't done that, they would have been able to think of something better.'
>
> When you don't do as well it's like, 'I suck, I'm terrible, I'm ugly, I'm gross.'

Actresses, perhaps, are more fortunate than standup comics who are solely responsible for the outcome of a performance. The ones who take failure to heart try to learn from it through a review process following the show, determined not to repeat the same mistakes twice. Dealing with bombs is a learning process which involves giving oneself "pep talks" and "psyching oneself out". Improvisers soon learn that taking failure to heart is detrimental to the staging of a show, giving off a negative impression. They learn that no matter how terribly they feel about a poor performance, the show comes first. Two actresses admit:

> I still get upset about it but now I go, 'Well, O.K. you did badly this time but you're not gonna stop so you better figure out how to get better.' And you have to learn how it goes as opposed to let it eat you away.

> I've learned to sort of laugh whenever we get the "zero"...Because the important thing is to get the show on, to continue improvising, to have the craft keep going.

Obviously, their continued presence in the comedy field is an indication that they have learned to cope with failure and move on. One comedienne claims this is comedy's unique training ground because, "you get better by going up and bombing all the time." With experience comes improvement and equally important, self-confidence. In the end, it is this quality which enables comics not to be debilitated by failure. One pro puts this quite eloquently:

> When I came to the realization that what I was doing was funny, truly genuinely funny stuff, and I wanted to share this with people, that helped tremendously...Because even if I came off stage and I thought it wasn't right, they weren't receptive, I didn't feel like slashing my wrists.

Aside from these emotional ramifications, comics try to avoid failure for another reason, primarily because it is extremely "unprofessional looking" to bomb. Given that each performance involves creating a highly favourable impression, bombing completely discredits this image. The comic who has set out to impress the audience with her wit, skill and talent, falls flat on her face. No wonder her belief in herself is momentarily shaken as she too has doubts about the image she so carefully tries to maintain.

Dealing with failure, although imperative, is only one of a long list of skills a comedienne must acquire before she achieves competence and mastery of her craft. What then, are the mechanics involved in comedy performance? How does a comic go about the arduous process of translating a funny thought or observation into a comical routine? These are a few of the questions which will be dealt with in the next section.

MECHANICS

Mechanics refers to everything from the actual conception of material, to the performance and all points in between. Included in this heading are proper wording, mastery of accents and inflections, gestures, facial expressions and timing. Once the show is over, a careful review process is necessary. Let us now examine each of these steps more closely, starting with how a comic puts together a routine or act.

Material

Most people have a sense of humour and even those deadly serious types surprise us every now and then with a witty remark. What though, differentiates the comic from the class or office clown? The first step is the transition from an amusing observation in the brain to an actual amusing delivery on stage. It is an exceedingly difficult task, as one amateur explains:

> Thinking of things that are funny is easy. It's working them into a format that you can present that is really the tricky part...A thing can be funny but it can take maybe three, four sentences to tell somebody and set them up for it and you really can't afford to do that.

Ideally, as one pro insists, every single word should count. How, then, does one get rid of extraneous material, or even recognize what constitutes excessive wordiness? Again, this occurs through trial and error, a process fraught with tensions of its own, as it may take several tries before a joke actually "works". A comic on stage must deal with many elements at once: concentration, awareness of the audience, her own energy levels, her timing, let alone simply remembering the order of her material. Thus, it is the nature of comedy performing that breeds uncertainty and anxiety.

Aside from improvisational material which is spontaneous and immediate, most comics work with scripted routines or a combination of scripts and improv. Unlike plays, their routines are not static but constantly changing as they add new "bits" and

delete weaker or no longer topical material. Most comics carry an all important notebook with them at all times, so as not to lose ideas which come when they are least expected. Beyond this similarity, there is no hard and fast pattern as to when these ideas come or how they are formed:

> Usually I carry a notebook with me everywhere I go. Just anything that strikes me funny or any kind of joke I think of, I scrawl down...It's just constant. Constant writing. The more I gather, the more I have to work with.
>
> The best time for me to think of a joke is when I'm driving to a gig. It's when I have the pressure that things start cooking.
>
> I first think about what I want to say or think of a general topic that I'm interested in...Once I've got that it's how to say it. And I usually try to come upon a genre that's most incompatible with it.

Improvisers, faced with the challenge of spontaneous creativity, do not have the luxury of working with time-honoured, tested scripts. Generally, they enter a scene with an idea or character, building as they go along.

One of the key and perhaps surprising ingredients for success as a standup comic is discipline. Without the necessary discipline and willingness to work hard, even the funniest comic will sink into oblivion. One veteran pro insists:

> You have to be disciplined to be a good comic. You have to dress right, you have to speak right, you have to tape every performance, listen to them, analyze them, find out what went wrong, go home, rewrite the notes and make sure you don't make the same mistakes twice. 'Cause that's how you learn.

The above quote highlights the importance of the entire review process, one which we shall now discuss in greater detail.

The Review Process

The best way to distinguish the dabbler from the serious amateur is to examine how seriously they take the review process to heart. By the same token, the few pros who lack the discipline to commit themselves to the review process are ashamed of this lack of commitment:

> Listen to your tape and hear the joke that gets the laugh. And then take that joke and see where it is that the joke gets the laugh. And then cut everything else...Or try to pare it down and rephrase it so that what you've got is laugh,laugh,laugh,laugh. Instead of weak,laugh,chuckle,mild. It's just a matter of doing it. You've gotta tape, you gotta listen, you gotta edit, you've gotta do all those things that I don't do.

The review process, then, is crucial for picking out not only mistakes, but also what worked well. While reviewing is often sobering and humbling, it can also be positively enlightening. An amateur interviewed talks about this double-edged sword:

> You might catch something that's not totally right. Especially your timing. Am I talking too slow? Am I talking too fast?...There's a couple of lines where I feel my delivery is really good so I watch those and see what I'm doing there.

It should be noted that there are actually two review processes. The first goes on during the actual performance and involves both concentration and an awareness of the audience. (This process will be discussed in the next chapter which deals with comic-audience interaction.) The post performance review enables the comic to pinpoint the exact nature and cause of the errors she senses she was committing during the show. Some comics allow enough time to pass before reviewing so that they can gain the distance necessary for a more objective assessment, as one comic explains:

> I let it soak in and I try to figure out my own mistakes, what worked and what didn't and I jot down notes in my book. Then I listen to it the next day and then I pick out again. It's editing and reworking.

The amount of reworking to be done as well as the degree of self-criticism varies with each individual. Some comics take note of poor delivery and work on perfecting a few lines here and there. Others pay a great deal of attention to the smallest of details. One improv actress describes her review process:

> I look at the stuff I've done coming into a scene. 'Well, I shouldn't have done that,' or, 'I should've come in with a different attitude toward the scene and had a different idea'...I look at my characters and see how strong and how weak they were...Especially after a bad show, you can always pick up faults...technical notes.

Picking up and correcting faults is what the review process is all about. As some of their comments indicate, for comics the hardest skill to achieve is proper timing.

Timing

It is no exaggeration to say that timing and delivery are the bane of comediennes' existence. With it, there are waves of laughter. Without it, there are merely smiles and the occasional chuckle. All comics are unanimous about the importance of good timing. Where this argument breaks down is in what I have dubbed the "innate debate". Can timing be taught? The optimists (who comprise the minority of this particular sample) believe it can. Two improv actresses maintain:

> I think you can learn timing. It's a matter of working a lot with it and seeing what the crowd reaction is...experimentation, finding out what works and what doesn't.

> After working in comedy for a while you develop a sense of timing...sort of a sixth sense when you know something's going to work. You have to go for it though. There's no turning back.

Significantly, whereas some improvisers believe it is possible to learn timing, standup comics are less convinced of this. Two pro comics state categorically:

> Timing is everything. I can't teach it. I can teach presentation but not timing - it's innate.

> I don't think you can learn it. If you can...it takes a long time and maybe you look funny if you have timing taught to you.

Comics who recognize and admire good timing are hard-pressed to actually define it in tangible terms. Its illusive quality leads to abstract definitions and comparison with musical scores, as illustrated by the following comments:

> It's all beats and soul. It's like, a motion, a beat; a comeback, a beat; a motion, a beat.

> You should be waiting so that what it should be is kind of an undulating thing building to a climax, the laughter should be just going and going.

> It's something in you. It's in the way people talk. Somebody that isn't even a comedian but he's the funny guy around the group, you know he's got that quick delivery, he's got the good timing that makes people laugh every time...

It is an unwritten law of comedy that the best jokes in the world are lost if the timing is off. Pros and amateurs alike constantly fret over their delivery. It is this element, more so than any other, which worries neophytes. The motto seems to be, "You can blow a great line with bad timing." The following quote from a pro illustrates this fear:

> I worry that my timing is not so good. I still do step on a lot of laughs. I don't wait long enough because I don't want that pause.

That pause is the dreadful sound of silence. Amateurs often race through their routines because they are unable to bear the silence where laughter should have been. It takes confidence in one's ability to wait out the pause. Lack of confidence can interfere with learning the skill of timing.

STYLE: GIMMICKS AND TRADEMARKS

We have seen how comics must work at putting together routines and practice their timing and delivery. An equally important task faces all comics, being especially problematic for the novice: how can she stand out in a field where everyone strives for originality? Since what they say is not nearly as memorable as how they say it, comics feel pressured to find an easily identifiable style or gimmick that will set them apart from a veritable herd of talented people. This involves finding the method of delivery and/or "hook" which best suits them and using facial expressions, gestures, body movements, voice inflections and accents to cement their imprint. How important are these elements? Consider the following observations from a top male Canadian comic:

> 15-20% of it is knowing how to play the space. About 5% of it is content, believe it or not. And this remaining 70-80% is delivery...Some of the most successful and I might add, highly paid comedians have the worst material but they sell it with personality. It's all in the delivery.
>
> I lack a hook or an image. I don't have much of a recognizable hook or style...If I had one leg, I'd be so famous right now. If I had an eye patch, if I had a hook, something, if I was Nicaraguan I'd be so famous now. There's comedians all over now who are really famous because they're Russian or because they're handsome or they're really weird looking...It's called recognition factor - a guy can be really funny and another guy can be less funny but you'll remember him because he was the guy with the wooden leg.

With the exception of radio and the printed word, comedy is a highly visual medium, and this makes finding a style all the more imperative. Some comics rely heavily on props and many sight gags (although this was not favoured by the women interviewed). Others will use costume to their advantage, dressing in bizarre fashion to accentuate the humourous impression they wish to create. A feminist comic describes her performance pieces as costume oriented:

> I usually try to work in stupid sight gags for entering. For the "Vulva" piece, I have my band, or it could be just a guitar player or conga player already playing. And then I may put sunglasses on my face/clitoris...I get a laugh for just being there - I look ridiculous in a vulva suit, sunglasses and dancing.

For many comics, developing a unique style may begin with a tacky costume or equally arresting visual props or it may begin with the adoption of distinctive character traits. For instance, a popular film comic, Bob Goldwaith, adopts the persona of an obnoxious child as he screams most of his routine. Often these single traits then become incorporated into distinct stage personas, as the following descriptions from my field notes illustrate:

> K. came out in flat shoes, short white socks, a flouncy sundress with billowy folds and a ribbon in her dark curly hair. In a word: girlish. When she spoke her first line in an extremely nasal whine, the audience laughed...The little girl gimmick was complete. The other part of her image consisted of the New York Jewish woman who whines about anything and everything.

> If other comediennes have a trademark by which they're identified, J. is gimmick personified. Her style of dress, use of props, the image she creates for herself, are part of her philosophy that her routine isn't an act but a religious experience. As the theme music blared in the background, J., holding her accordion and dressed in full regalia (a long white crepe gown with tacky gold cape, bracelets, bangles, rings and a flower in her hair), floated onto the stage and greeted the audience with, 'Hi, pigs!'

This particular comic also had a variety of catch phrases which she repeated throughout her performance. Like other comics, for instance, Joan Rivers' famous "Can we talk?" byline, she used these phrases frequently to reconnect with her audience:

> One of her catch phrases, which she uttered with arms wide open was, "Come closer Montreal, come closer to the goddess"...She often followed her bizarre statements with "You'll see" or "It could happen." For all her catch phrases, she deepened her voice and grunted.

Interestingly enough, while gimmicks and catch phrases are skillfully manipulated by the comic to elicit audience response, most of them are stumbled upon accidentally. Often it is an ad-lib, off-the-cuff remark which seems to grab the audience's attention. The comic shrewdly repeats this phrase the following night and in time, it becomes his or her signature piece. For instance, Milton Berle relates how well into his career, he stumbled upon his "Uncle Miltie" image. Meant merely as an admonition to children to listen to their parents, much to his delight, the phrase struck a chord and thereafter, he became instantly recognizable as "Uncle Miltie" (Berle, 1974).

Many of the comics interviewed for this study readily admitted to having a unique style but spoke of it in abstract terms. They knew their style had evolved over time but could not pinpoint when or how breakthroughs occurred. In fact, two comics initially hedged when asked to define their style but finally admitted to some recognizable trademarks:

> I don't think I can even be categorized. I'm not a punchline person, I'm not a satirist, I'm not a character or an improviser on stage. I'm almost a blend of all these with a little weirdness thrown in...I get stopped on the street; the "Fishwoman". They call me the "Fishwoman" because I do a soliloquy with a fishbowl. They seem to remember that a lot.

> The "Wizard of Oz" is my trademark. 'You know, she's the woman who does the Wizard,' 'Oh, yeah, her, she's great.' Or they used to go, 'The woman with the guitar' 'cause I was the only woman with a guitar in my act at the time.

Once again, there are no clear-cut rules for finding a trademark or developing one's style. The comic can only hope he or she will find that special hook through constant writing and performing. When he or she does latch onto a hook, it will instantly identify him or her as a unique comic, "the one who does..."

An equally important factor in the success of a comic involves a quality often used to judge actors: stage presence. Simply put, it refers to one's ability to command attention while on stage, to have that special magnetism which attracts people's attention. As with the question of timing, there is a debate as to whether or not one can develop this quality or whether stage presence is yet another inherent gift.

In standup, whereas a well-timed, exasperated look can be very funny, the cleverest joke will go unnoticed, falling on deaf ears if recited in a monotone from a comic who is frozen to the floor. Joan Rivers attributes her earlier failures to this lack of stage presence. She writes:

> I was still scared to touch the microphone and stood anchored, absolutely rigid, unable to move my head because my voice would fade. I would be hired for Friday and Saturday nights and never make it past Friday... (1986:170).

Rivers goes on to describe the long hard process involved in carving out an identity and strong presence on stage. In part, it has to do with confidence and this, as noted previously, can only come with the benefit of experience. Rather than being worked on directly, stage presence and style evolve naturally out of the effort comics make to improve and perfect their overall delivery.

Stage presence need not be blatant or involve dramatic character transformations. Many comics who do not use gimmicks or catch phrases have adopted a consistent style of delivery which is an extension or slight exaggeration of their off stage personalities. Some pace frequently as they lampoon their targets. One such self-titled "walker" who uses a variety of accents, body movements and facial expressions admits:

> I know I'm very aggressive but I just have an aggressive personality. I couldn't play the dummy because I'm not. I come off...a little cocky, a little arrogant.

Others adopt a low-key, subtle style. They may be caustic in their material, yet deliver it as a "normal" person who is slightly bewildered and beleaguered by modern reality, as the following example from my field notes demonstrates:

> R. came out in an elegant white dress, looking and sounding very comfortable and relaxed. Throughout her entire act, she leaned against the microphone stand as she talked. R. had no flashy gimmick, but didn't need one. She delivered her monologue quietly with impeccable timing and the ability to milk jokes perfectly.

As is the case with all the elements which fall under the rubric of mechanics, there are no right or wrong answers when it comes to style. Some comics insist on elaborate props or getups. Others use a few catch phrases or act out unique impressions. Some are actually impressionists. Still others accentuate their own personalities on stage. The key points are these: first, all comics must find the method of delivery and/or "hook" which suits them best, and secondly, facial expressions, gestures, body movements, voice inflections and accents are integral components of comedy performance.

In essence, comics, as they develop their unique stage identities, can be placed along a continuum, from those who adopt a completely different stage persona to those who decide to capitalize on a catch phrase or gimmick, to others who are content to adopt a low key style and approach which is still distinctive enough to set them apart. The very notion of having to discover a recognizable hook is a perfect example of how market forces can conspire to keep a comic from ever reaching the top of the career rung, or conversely, making him or her an overnight sensation.

CONCLUSION

Learning to be a good comic and gaining confidence in one's sense of professionalism are one and the same process. Talent alone is not enough. Working, editing , reviewing and being open to criticism are essential for improvement. For comics, impression management involves the creation of a tight routine where timing, style and delivery fall into place and they literally "knock 'em dead". Unfortunately, as has already been demonstrated, unlike other performing arts, comics learn the ropes by exposing their novice status in front of audiences, refining and honing their skills with each passing performance. This painful learning process turns awkward amateurs into sophisticated pros, and keeps pros humble by reminding them that they too stumble occasionally.

It would all be much simpler if a young man or woman could go to comedy school, graduate with honours, get a job as a professional comic and make his or her parents proud. As we have seen, it does not work that way. The route he or she takes, from his or her initial interest in humour to committing him or herself to comedy and learning, mostly through trial and error, all the skills and techniques necessary to be successful, is often a long and convoluted one. Even when he or she has reached professional status and is branching out, insecurity remains. For a performer's popularity is subject to audience approval and here there are no guarantees, especially for women, who are in a traditionally all male field. In the next chapter, we shall look at what, in fact, keeps the performer alive and in business: the audience.

Chapter 6
COMIC/AUDIENCE INTERACTION: PULLING THE LAUGH STRINGS

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has ever stood in front of a group of people intending to persuade or convince them, has been faced with the issue of control. Performers, whose very occupation involves presenting themselves before audiences, must somehow deal with control, despite any discomfort this may cause. Moreover, this control can be divided into two areas. The first involves control over oneself, one's impression and presentation. The second involves control over a group of people, particularly their emotions. This is a more threatening process, for it involves an imbalance of power. This does not necessarily make it a negative thing, but it does involve manipulation on the part of performers.

Indeed, control is a crucial aspect of standup comedy. In its most obvious form, control is used to elicit audience laughter and to decimate hecklers. But to view control in this simplified manner is to ignore the dynamics of comic/audience interaction. Indeed, comics, by their very presence on stage, must be in control of their performance - its pace, style, content. When they are funny, they can be tremendously powerful, possessing the ability to control people's behaviour and emotions, primarily laughter. However, the audience itself is far from powerless. On the contrary, it can be argued that they exert, often unconsciously, a certain amount of potential and actual control over the comedian. We shall see how, by withholding their approval, applause and laughter, the audience forces a comic to change his or her tactics in order to please them and keep their attention. This is why comics desperately need to be liked and work hard at establishing a rapport with their

audiences. Winning them over also gives a comic valuable allies in the event of major disturbances and heckling, perhaps the most dangerous occupational hazard.

In a very real sense, heckling, as the ultimate challenge to a comic's supposedly legitimate authority claims, is akin to hazing. All comics, regardless of gender, must regain control of the situation if the performance is to continue. Yet, it is my contention that this is even more imperative for women because, as shall be demonstrated, many audiences have difficulty accepting women as comics. Thus, if a woman breaks down when under attack and cannot rise to the challenge provided by hecklers, it may be taken as proof that like all women who are out of their league, she does not belong in the field of standup comedy.

While it is logical to assume that if women are to retain control they must be vicious and aggressive (as standup tradition dictates), this is a patently false assertion. Comediennes successfully use a variety of methods to control their audiences, many of which involve a more low key approach than fear and intimidation. One can conclude that perhaps the very notion of control, with its repressive connotations, has also been male defined. Female comics, in offering other techniques and approaching audiences as potential friends rather than automatic adversaries, are again redefining the field of standup comedy.

This chapter deals with the complex interaction between the comedienne and her audiences, with the issue of control at its core. We begin by describing the setting in which this interaction takes place and the audience is created. We will look at how, through the awareness each has of the other, the situation is continually being defined by both parties. This awareness is especially important if the comedienne is to retain control over the performance. We will examine, in detail, the various ways in which comediennes approach their audiences, as their orientations determine both the nature of the rapport they establish and the methods of control they employ. Finally,

we will examine heckling as an attempt by audience members to redefine the situation, thereby controlling both the comedienne and the audience.

This exploration of the subtleties of comic/audience interaction takes place on two levels. Comics' awareness of the audience, definitions of the situation, the necessity of establishing rapport, the need to be liked and their general approaches to audiences involve subjective perceptions and thus, are more abstract. It should be noted that although these concerns face male and female comics alike, only women were interviewed for this study. Therefore, gender comparisons on the abstract level must await further research. When we move to an examination of more concrete, observable matters, such as audience responses to female comics and how comics deal with heckling, it is possible to compare male and female comics. This is not to suggest that all male comics respond in a particular way against which all female comics rebel. Rather than focusing solely on the gender of the individual performer, comparisons will be based on what can be termed gender styles. Standup comedy provides traditional, male defined and created methods for handling audiences which appeal to many comics, regardless of gender. Yet, these traditional methods are being challenged and humanized by what can be viewed as typically feminine approaches. Examples of these methods are averting confrontation by ignoring hecklers, or turning to the audience for support.

It must be stressed that just as each comedienne has her own personality and performing orientation, so too does each audience have its own character and its members their own beliefs about women's proper sphere. Thus, there are no "best" ways of retaining control, no rights or wrongs, no absolutes. There are, however, tangible differences in how some male and some female comics assert control over their audiences and this can be traced back to the central theme of this thesis. I have tried to demonstrate that comedy, because it has been viewed as an aggressive medium, has,

by extension, been deemed inappropriate for women. Arguably, aggression is most evident in the exchange between comics and hecklers. This is yet another reason both audiences and men who work in comedy are so resistant to female comics: in the final analysis, comedy is about control - over people, their reactions and behaviour. Traditionally, it is women who have been controlled. Comediennes, in their ability to control others and their refusal to be subordinate, are issuing a serious challenge to the notion of male supremacy.

THE SETTING

In the previous chapter we saw how the standup comedy circuit involves a variety of players who come together in a specific venue for the duration of a performance. It is difficult, if not impossible, to grasp the intricacies of comedy performing without an understanding of the setup itself. Hence, this section will be devoted to a detailed description of a typical show in a typical comedy club.

To begin with, most of the clubs are licensed establishments which rely on liquor sales to stay in business. The availability and consumption of alcohol has implications for audience behaviour, resulting in greater probability of heckling. Another striking feature of club attendance is the audience composition. In close to fifty shows which I have attended at various clubs over the past three years, the vast majority of people were under thirty-five. (This division is less pronounced when performances take place in more upscale venues such as theatres and concert halls.) All shows are at night and rarely begin before 8:30 P.M. In most clubs, patrons enter up to forty-five minutes before scheduled showtime. Furthermore, shows rarely begin on schedule, partly since waiting increases anticipation.

Long before the show begins, there is a palpable sense of excitement mixed with constant activity. Phones are ringing, barmaids take orders and get drinks, bouncers and managers/owners run around taking care of last minute details. Comics saunter in anywhere from an hour to fifteen minutes before showtime and after a brief chat with managers, they do one of two things. Either they go off in a corner alone or with fellow performers, or they mingle with the audience, wandering around to get a "feel for the crowd". In any case, they do not announce their presence, preferring to observe unobtrusively. This anonymity, (if possible), is crucial, for it is at this stage that they are able to pick up on cues as to what this type of audience might like and gauge how responsive they will be.

The physical layout of the club clearly delineates the performers from the audience, separating the two groups into "us" and "them". An elevated stage takes up almost the entire back wall. Surrounding and facing this stage are tables and chairs which can be positioned to face the stage once the show starts. There is also a backstage which only performers and club personnel have access to. As Goffman (1959) illustrates in The Presentation of Self In Everyday Life, audiences are not permitted to enter these backstage regions since it is here that one's guard is let down, the performance is "off", mistakes are made and perfect images no longer maintained. Audiences must not be privy to any of this for it would seriously disturb the carefully cultivated impressions which comics present on stage.

The importance of distinguishing the space where a show is created from where it is witnessed is reinforced by the possessiveness with which performers guard their space. A common exchange initiated by comics (especially emcees) to audience members sitting so close that they are barely on top of the performer is: "Are you in show business?" "No," replies the baffled person. "Then get your foot off my fucking stage," growls the comic.

To further highlight the special status of performers, once the show begins, the lighting is focused on the stage while the rest of the room is darkened. This makes it easy for the audience to see the performer, but it is a disadvantage for comics. In many venues, the spotlight has a blinding effect, making it difficult to see all but a few rows to the side and directly in front. This limited field of vision becomes especially problematic in the event of heckling, when the comic at times cannot even see the person who is disrupting his or her routine.

Enjoyment of performances depends primarily on two senses: sight and sound. Consequently, aside from putting the performer in a spotlight, he or she also has access to (and usually makes use of) a microphone. While the mike allows everyone in the room, regardless of their location, to hear the show, it is also a powerful tool to control "shit disturbers". Unless they are near him or her, few people can hear a fellow audience member speak. Thus, in any confrontation, the comic, by virtue of her ability to drown out troublemakers, has the upper hand.

Social Distance

The physical setup is important for it has a profound impact on the nature of the interaction between comics and their audiences. Based on their status and roles, there is a clearly marked physical gap between the two which translates into social distance. The setup is analogous to that in a classroom. In his seminal work The Sociology of Teaching, Waller (1932:60) compares a classroom to an audience. The most significant form of interaction takes place not between the pupils but between the class and the teacher. For all intents and purposes, it is the teacher who is the focus of attention. Just as the pupil would not dare sit at a teacher's desk, so too is it highly unlikely that an audience member would venture onto the stage, grab the microphone and begin talking.

Social distance brings with it an unfortunate "catch-22". On the one hand, this delineation of status and roles is essential for it prescribes the appropriate behaviours for all concerned within a given situation. On the other hand, social distance can create antagonism and an "opposite sides of the fence" mentality. In the case of the school Waller writes:

> Social distance obstructs appeal because it makes it difficult for the teacher to speak to the child as one human being to another (1932:209).

This is not to suggest that a comic relates to her audience as less than human. However, the physical and social distance she faces must be overcome if she intends to make contact with her audience and come across as a lik able person. Comparisons with classrooms allow us to grasp the importance of establishing a rapport with one's audience, a concept which will be discussed shortly.

Energy

The physical setup in a comedy club is accompanied by a popular buzzword used constantly by performers: energy. They talk incessantly about making sure their own energy is "up" when they perform, about letting the audience "feed off" their energy, about losing their energy when a performance is obviously failing. It is this energy which motivates them, at times driving them into near-frenzied performances.

Ideally, energy works both ways, emanating from the audience as well as the performer. Built into the very structure of the club is an attempt to create an energetic, lively atmosphere. Muted lighting combined with upbeat, loud rock music greet customers the moment they enter the club. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes describes this atmosphere:

> It was a young crowd. Most people were under thirty although there were around eight middle-aged couples and a few elderly people. Several tables were filled with students (who pay half-price on Thursday nights). As the club filled up, the noise level rose. People

> were smoking, eating, drinking, talking and laughing long before the show began. The lighting was muted and loud 60's rock music was playing on the stereo. The crowd was casually dressed, the noise level quite high. There was an air of anticipation in the room as people had come to laugh and enjoy themselves.

Combined together, the microphone, background music, the layout of tables and chairs produce a darker, more intimate setting, facilitating interaction between the comic and the audience. Aside from enhancing audience enjoyment, a more intimate physical layout provides tangible benefits for the performer. For instance, in one particular club, the tables are spread out lengthwise over a wide area and the resulting lack of intimacy prevents the buildup of contagious laughter and hampers the performance, as an amateur explained:

> There's not enough density here. I'll get the laughs but it'll be a laugh, dead; a laugh, dead. No momentum - it doesn't build.

Thus, physical setting and energy are crucial to the staging of a successful show. Moreover, all of this energy is magnified right before the show begins. The lights are dimmed even further and as the raucous theme music blares, the spotlights are turned on and a voice booms, announcing the show and urging the audience to clap. For its part, the audience responds dutifully with anticipatory applause.

CREATION OF AN AUDIENCE: THE EMCEE

The first person to take the stage is the emcee, usually, but not always, a professional comic as well. The primary task of the emcee is to "warm up" the audience, get them in a laughing mood, one which will hopefully escalate throughout the show. In addition,

it is up to the emcee to make contact with the audience as a group and with a few individuals on a one-to-one level. This is crucial, for unless audiences feel they are truly a part of the show, they will not be receptive to the performer.

In a sense, the pre-performance atmosphere supplied by the club involves a series of tactics designed to get a room filled with strangers to react not as individuals, but as an audience. Thus an audience, although treated by performers as an entity in and of itself, is actually an artificial creation. Prior to the show, it consists of disparate groups of individuals who are unknown to each other. It is the job of the emcee to make all these individuals react as one. This makes sense when we add the problem of control, which must remain in the hands of the performer at all times. It would be virtually impossible to arrive at any sort of consensus with up to 200 individual opinions. However, it is much simpler to control all these people if they act and react as one. A veteran male comic offered this profound observation; "I can't get into 200 heads. The secret is to get 200 people into mine."

The emcee begins to create this group mind, so to speak, by asking leading questions, usually about the local scene, which appeal to common "we're-all-in-this-together" experiences. Since comedy performances, as a rule, demand participation, this identification with each other (and with the performer) is crucial. If some kind of bond, no matter how tenuous, is not established, people will not feel the urge to become involved. On the other hand, if the emcee has instilled a sense of "we-ness", the audience as a whole will be more willing to give the comics a chance and forgive them if they slip up occasionally. In effect, a group mind or "mob mentality" is created, one which reduces individual inhibitions, allowing for greater participation. This involvement and shared identification results in a situation in which people feel comfortable and therefore, are free to laugh. (Laughter entails a release of emotion

and inhibitions, and is usually freer when people feel comfortable with each other.) This, in turn, allows comics to control the definition of the situation.

The artificial creation of an audience must be accompanied by control techniques which ensure audience involvement and participation. The following excerpts from my fieldnotes provide examples of common emcee jargon used to warm up audiences:

> C. began as usual by thanking the audience for coming and asking how they were doing...He asked a group of students where they were from and they yelled, 'Guelph!' This had several other tables of the Guelph University contingent cheering and applauding. He asked each of the four or so groups sitting at different tables what they were studying...Meanwhile, a sizeable number of students booed when they heard the others were from Guelph. 'You're from Mac, right?' C. guessed. 'You talk in short forms - Mac, Poli Sci. You probably use short forms when you have sex too.' There followed a brief, good-natured rivalry between McMaster and Guelph students with each applauding comments made by their own. C. commented, 'Everybody else is probably going, 'Oh, shit, why did I come tonight.' He then talked about the inept Hamilton police force hanging out at Tim Horton's...
>
> He began by talking about his recent experiences in L.A. as a warm-up act for Joan Rivers on her new show. He made fun of L.A. and some of their weird customs. 'But now I'm back in Hamilton where I want to be,' he said, rolling his eyes to applause from the audience...He also explained that the show was being filmed by channel 11 and began mocking a Chinese news reporter who had a poor English accent and pronunciation. Then he made fun of the actual news: 'The number one story last night: a rabid dog in Dundas.' He proceeded to poke fun at the police officer who stood five feet away and shot at the dog several times, mocking the ineptitude of the police force. This entire story elicited much laughter.

In the above examples, we see how the emcee involves people in the show by singling out groups of individuals, a favourite target being students. However, wary of excluding everyone else in the process, he or she quickly involves the audience as a whole by mocking people and institutions which are unique to the local (city) scene. The audience laughs in recognition of a common plight which they all share, or at a scapegoat.

DEFINING THE SITUATION

By now it should be apparent that as haphazard as it may seem to the uninitiated, there are structures, methods and techniques which, if executed with skill and expertise, increase the likelihood of audience enjoyment and a successful show. Ultimately, it is the comic who is responsible for its success (or failure). The definition of the situation rests on his or her shoulders. If he or she can convince everyone else in the room to share this definition, he or she will have won the battle, or at least averted the chance of minor and major skirmishes.

The definition of any given situation at any given time is not merely a result, but a process. It involves careful consideration of the norms, behaviours and personalities of all people taking part in the interaction. Whatever one's interpretation of one's immediate surroundings, it is followed by a plan of action based on this interpretation. Waller (1932) demonstrates how, within the classroom, it is the teacher who controls the definition of the situation. He defines the concept thus:

> It is the process in which the individual explores the behaviour possibilities of a situation, marking out particularly the limitations which the situation imposes on his behaviour, with the final result that the individual forms an attitude toward the situation or more exactly, in the situation (Waller, 1932:292).

Waller goes on to state that in many cases, one person alone can have a powerful influence on how others define the situation. This is certainly true for teachers and equally so for comics. It is the performer who sets up the rules and often tells the audience exactly what is going on in that room at that moment. She defines and interprets the very relationship and appropriate roles by her interaction with the audience, by how she responds to disturbances, from minor distractions to heckling. Indeed, heckling can be viewed as an alternative definition of the situation in which an

audience member challenges the comic, the performance and the balance of power. (We will deal with heckling at the end of the chapter.)

TAILORING

Just as in any other type of interaction, there are all sorts of factors within the setting which affect the dynamics between a comedienne and her audiences. Some of these are beyond the performers control, but others can be taken into account and adjusted to before the actual performance. Here we come to the practice of tailoring one's material to various types of audiences, or more specifically, types of venues. Obviously, both the material performed and the approach taken will differ when a comic performs in a "dive" bar one night and at a charity drive the next. For instance, while performances at comedy clubs are often replete with "dick jokes" and expletives, those at the Just For Laughs comedy festival were devoid of such antics. In fact, my field notes of this festival do not contain a single instance of a comic using expletives. The whole notion of tailoring allows us to see that audiences do have control over the comic, although most are unaware of this fact. Consequently, for their own protection and peace of mind, most comics find out everything possible about a venue in advance to tailor their performance accordingly:

> Usually I try to get an idea of what kind of a room it is and what kind of clientele it attracts because then you know what's probably gonna work. Sometimes, of course, it's a total situation where you don't expect the room to be so large or to be in a disco or whatever.
>
> You go to places like Brandy's or just bars. The audiences are different in a sense that sometimes they're really into themselves. They're maybe there for the entertainment but they're with their friends, there's probably a large group of them drinking heavily. There's usually an area of the bar where a hockey game is on, there's a video game or a standup bar...So you have to play to the people who are watching you...You gotta be loud.

> If you'd be too uppity in your content, you're gonna lose your audience, depending on where you are. If you'd be too guttural...I mean, K. would bomb in some of the places that I've played. And I may bomb in the places that he kills. And I'm glad about that.

Appearing before audiences who are immersed in the tough bar scene is especially problematic for female comics. For it is here that machismo is elevated to cult status. Heavy drinking, sports and boisterous talk are considered quintessential masculine activities. Thus, when a woman intrudes on this male gathering (unless she's on the arm of 'her man'), she is implicitly issuing a challenge of sorts. Usually, comediennes who work the "rough dives" circuit, as a matter of survival, take a much more aggressive approach to performing. Consider the experiences of two British comediennes:

> The workers were a really rough school...there's kids running about, they're drunk most of the time, there's bingo coming up, there's pretty waitresses or pretty women flitting about, so you've got to go out and attack straight away.It's like a dog, if you show fear it'll bite you (Banks and Swift, 1987:13).

> At times the preconceptions of male audiences make it an uphill task. Ellie Laine once played to 1,500 paralytic bikers and her combination of wit and humour was beyond them. She topped the bill after four strippers and a stag comic; despite the cries of, 'Get 'em off!' and a few proffered penises from the balcony, she finished her set (ibid).

Sometimes audiences in the same venue can be very different as well. Although they are groups of distinct individuals, audiences, like classes, have their own character. This adds to the vulnerability and insecurity comics feel before each show.

AWARENESS OF THE AUDIENCE

Despite all the advanced preparation, one can never predict with absolute certainty the type of audience - its composition, mood, interests. Consequently, comediennes must

remain fairly flexible. If they sense they are losing the audience, they must find a way to bring it back. In the previous chapter we saw that comics, in reviewing their performances, analyze, examine and correct their mistakes. They note where the laughs came, where they didn't and why. It was suggested that in addition to a post-performance review, comics are constantly attuned to the audience. Performers juggle a multitude of tasks simultaneously: they concentrate on remembering their material, delivering it with energy and timing. Equally important, they constantly gauge the audience's reactions.

An awareness of the audience is necessary for an accurate interpretation of the situation. As the interactive process continues between both parties, changes may occur in their perceptions and behaviour. The comic must be aware of even the most subtle signs of restlessness or discontent and quickly redefine the situation as one of enjoyment. Again, this entire process can be compared to a classroom where, by taking each others reactions and behaviours into account before taking action, both pupils and teachers are continually defining and redefining the situation (Martin, 1976:19). If a teacher wanders off and loses her critical awareness of what is happening in the classroom, the result may be disastrous. (Obviously, the situation facing teachers and performers differs considerably in that teachers have their control over pupils socially sanctioned. However, since teaching shares certain characteristics with performing, I shall be referring to classroom analogies where applicable. These comparisons are used merely for illustrative purposes.)

Almost all the comic performers interviewed for this study talked about how essential having this critical awareness is. As soon as they sense they may be on thin ice, their minds race ahead to choose a new line of action:

> My heart palpitates. I'm constantly talking to myself when I'm up on stage and internalising. I'm smiling for them and I'm saying to myself, 'O.K. they didn't laugh at that one, get on to the next one. Make sure

> your energy's up. Make sure you're smiling. Make sure you're giving them a lot of power.'
>
> You can sense their energy. You can tell when they're with you and then there are times you can tell that they're not...If I feel I'm losing them, then there is a panic and that panic urges you to go faster. And sometimes that can save you. It doesn't always work but you either try to change your rhythm or you start opening yourself up to new ideas, to start changing directions so you can get back on track.

The pressure felt by performers to regain the audience's attention and appreciation indicates that control is by no means one-sided. On the one hand, audiences, by their very reactions, influence comics to act in ways which would please the public. Comics are then forced to convince these audiences that they are indeed worth listening to. While control of the performance rests in the hands of the performer, audiences obviously do have power. One improv actress puts this quite eloquently when she explains:

> A lot of people don't realize that it's the audience that's feeding you. They're stoking the fire and without them, there's just nothing. There's just nothing there.

Since standup comedy is performed live, it is all the more imperative that comics be aware of their audiences. Otherwise, as one veteran pro male comic phrased it, "They'll lose total respect for you." Comics must maintain a sort of role distance. It is a difficult balancing act: while being absorbed in their delivery and performance, they must not be so absorbed that they lose sight of their audiences. Two comediennes explain:

> You can't be too caught up in exactly what's happening [on stage]. You have to be aware. You have to be your own critic, your own agent standing in the wings watching the whole thing happen.
>
> When I'm on stage I have what's called a third eye, is the best way to put it. I see what's going on stage and I see the audience but I also see myself watching.

If we look at the performing situation as one in which potential power struggles may break out between performers and their audiences, we can appreciate the usefulness of having this third eye. Ideally, through their constant awareness, comics try to anticipate problems and prevent situations from deteriorating to the point where they lose control over the audience.

Thus far, we have seen how audiences are both created and subtly controlled by comics. Initially, it appeared that performers hold the balance of power in their hands. However, the matter is not as simple as this. True, comics must retain a degree of control over both their performances and the audience. Demanding undivided attention and having the tools with which to command it, they bring audiences on a guided tour of their version of reality. Yet, it is not as if they are forcing people to act and react against their will, for both parties have voluntarily entered into this relationship. The audience, by its attention, laughter, and applause, freely hands the reigns of leadership over to the comic performer. Moreover, the audience has a great deal of influence and potential control over the comic. For just as easily as this relationship is artificially created, so too can it be irrevocably destroyed. This is why establishing a rapport with their audiences is the first step facing comics each time they take the stage to perform before a new audience.

RAPPORT, VULNERABILITY AND THE NEED TO BE LIKED

Establishing a rapport involves more than just gaining the audience's attention and trust. Audiences must come to believe that despite the comic's power position, he or she is actually no different from and no better than they are. The idea is to make the "us versus them" distinction less noticeable and to appear as non-threatening as possible. (Of course, there are some comics whose entire acts revolve around

intimidating tactics, but their approach does not require a positive rapport.) Therefore, the key to winning an audience over is getting them to identify with him or her by playing on their common human vulnerability. All comics interviewed agreed as to the importance of establishing this rapport, but, as demonstrated in the following quotes, each had their own tactics:

> The hardest thing in a routine is your opening line. It's your opening line that makes or breaks you...so it's that gap between your first joke and when you come on that the decision is made: 'Am I gonna like her or am I not gonna like her?'
>
> I am very guilty of putting up a fourth wall. Because I'm so trained to the stage, proscenium arch and the whole thing, it was real hard for me to be social with my audience and bring them in...Now I'm playing to them much more and I'm bringing them up with me.
>
> I try to remember that they're people. They're en masse but I mean, they are people, they're made up of individual persons in this audience. And just being as sincere with them as you would with your own friend or your own parents. And that is the key. Because if you attempt to pull something on them, they see it right away. It's almost like they're your children and you're their mother...if you're kind to them and show them that you love them, they will respond that way with you.

This last observation is a telling one, for it points to a distinction between those women who believe in treating their audiences with kindness in order to establish a rapport and many male comics who pick on their audiences from the moment they take the stage. The child analogy offers a more positive view of control. Here the comic is compared to a concerned mother who must display loving firmness towards her potentially wayward children.

Establishing a rapport is a process which involves various elements, each of which can be examined separately. The first, as we have just seen, is the comic's ability to get the audience to identify and relate to their common experience and humanity. Connected to this is the comic's need to be liked by the audience. It is not enough for the comic to merely entertain, because if for some reason the audience

does not approve of him or her, no matter how funny he or she is, they may not laugh. Conversely, if they like him or her almost instantly, in their eyes he or she can do no wrong. This reality, placing the comic in a precarious position, explains his or her desire for approval. Much has been made in the literature (particularly psychoanalytic works) of this need to be liked (see Goldstein, 1983). Contrary to popular belief, this need is not a manifestation of a pathetic neurosis but a logical necessity of performing. The majority of comediennes interviewed for this study discussed the importance of being liked by their audiences:

> The main thing about being a standup comedian is that they like you. You can have the worst material in the world, but if they like you, if you have a loveable face, whatever it is, if you have it, you'll succeed.
>
> Your purpose is to make them laugh and like you. And that's not the case when you come out so you're vulnerable in that sense.
>
> I'm actually trying to tone down my aggressiveness, to come across as a friendly person that you wanna like...Now that I'm at a level where I'm beyond it, I'm much further away from the audience and I don't know if they like me. I don't know if the audience thinks, 'Gee, I'd like to meet her after the show,' and think of me as a fun person.

What comes across very clearly in the need to be liked is a sense of vulnerability. This insecurity must be understood and located in the situational context faced by comics, a situation (and context) which changes with each new performance. As the authors of Pretend The World Is Funny and Forever illustrate:

> We would like to reiterate that being a comic is a demanding role. Every time the comic appears before an audience, he is clearly on trial. If he does not make people laugh, he is a failure...The comic is forever being tested and can never be sure of his prowess with the next audience he encounters (Fisher and Fisher, 1981:11).

In chapter five we heard from comics who deal with failure by coming to the realization that because audiences have their own personalities, what "kills" one night may "bomb" the next. This stark difference in audiences would come as no surprise to

teachers , who can all offer testimonials to the effect that every classroom has its own personality as well. Some classes are a delight to teach - bright, receptive, attentive- while others are exceedingly dull and still others are surprisingly hostile (Waller, 1932:163). Until he or she actually enters a comedy club and surveys the audience composition, a comic can never be sure just what he or she will be up against that night. Given these conditions, stage fright, even for the veteran pro, is understandable.

Since audiences are constantly changing, and as we saw in a previous chapter, the spectre of failure is always close at hand, insecurity and vulnerability are built-in occupational hazards for all comics. While the majority of the women interviewed acknowledged this insecurity, several of them discussed yet another source of vulnerability: the fact that as comics, they are exposing their inner selves on stage. Unlike actresses, they rarely hide behind masks, scripts and characters. Here, a few of these women describe this as a risky proposition:

> There's a great deal of risk in improv...it can be risky in that way because you reveal something in yourself. You've opened yourself up.
>
> Especially when you don't have props, when you're really up there, just telling jokes, just relating stories of your life, if they don't like you, that's you they don't like. It's you, it's what you're all about.
>
> I do one character which is almost like my alter ego, a side that people don't even see, and when she gets hurt on stage it's like a knife slicing through me...It's almost a shield for me so I'm able to express myself through this character and boy, if they dislike her, that's an immediate slash on me.

Vulnerability need not be a completely negative emotion. However, because the risk of exposure is so great, some comics react by holding back or becoming more aggressive. Others believe it is this very vulnerability which improves their overall delivery. The following comments are examples of these reactions:

> When I'm up there, I'm a little bit defensive, thinking, 'I'm giving you

> something, I don't want to give you everything.' That little point one is where that aggression comes.
>
> A lot of times my vulnerability kicks in my self-defense mechanism which creates the humour. The deeper I go, the more vulnerable I am, the funnier it'll get.
>
> I feel vulnerable because there's that pressure on you, whether you like it or not, to be good, to be funny. And I don't consider myself a funny person, but I like being up there.

Comics are free to choose the other option - not opening up to their audience and instead, rattling off a series of quips and one-liners. However, the consensus in the literature seems to be that those who opt for this method will not get very far. It is axiomatic that audiences respond best to comics who remain true to themselves:

> What audiences want is an intimacy with the person. The biggest trap comedians fall into is trying to get by on the basis of their material. That's just hiding behind jokes. It's not getting out in front of an audience and opening themselves up (Woody Allen, quoted in Fisher and Fisher, 1981:80).

To reiterate, opening oneself up is part and parcel of establishing that all-important rapport with one's audience. Yet, regardless of gender, it takes courage to reveal one's hurts, anger and doubts to strangers. Despite the risks involved, almost all the comediennes interviewed insisted on the importance of remaining true to themselves, that is, maintaining their integrity, on stage. Consequently, their routines are not merely "acts" but revealing self-portraits:

> So for me, God, and again, that's my standards, I have to do it for me. And I play a lot on truth and familiarity because everyone can identify with that...and that's the best thing - play for truth, play what you know.
>
> It's sort of like the difference between making a chocolate devil's cake and an angel food cake. You can offer up fluff and it's like in your dreams and the sensation is lulling, sweet. Or you can offer up something really substantial and meaty to chew on and that you're

> enjoying...I'm interested in that I maintain the integrity of the audience and the honesty of myself.

Exposing oneself on stage in front of strangers night after night, hoping to be liked and appreciated, is no easy task. Comics depend on their audiences' approval and this very dependence helps explain their sense of vulnerability, their concern with rapport and their need to be liked.

Thus far, we have examined the dynamics between both parties from the perspective of how the audience views and affects the performer. Equally important is how the performer views her audience and it is to this dynamic that we now turn.

COMEDIENNES' VIEWS OF AUDIENCES

It goes without saying that people involved in a specific situation may have entirely opposing interpretations of that very situation. Further, in any interaction where one party has more power than the others, it is his or her definition of the situation which will carry more weight. At the very least, the others will define their positions and possible courses of action based on the signals and cues emitted from the behaviour of the more powerful individual. For example, this is the case with students who are always "reading" teachers' reactions and planning their behaviour accordingly. There are two additional concepts here which are useful for our purposes. First, as Martin (1976) points out, how teachers <u>assume</u> pupils will react greatly influences their actions towards their "charges". Similarly, a teacher's views may change the personality of the classroom. Waller maintains:

> A very important determinant of the personality of a class is in the teacher's mind, for different attitudinal sets are called forth in the teacher by classes which shape themselves in different configurations, and the teacher shows a different side of himself to different classes (1932:162).

Secondly, sometimes a teacher interacts with particular pupils based not on their current behaviour, but their past antics (Martin, 1976:37).

Transferring these concepts to the interaction between a comic and her audiences, we shall see how a)her assumptions of how an audience will act influences the approach she takes towards them, and b)these views of audiences are based on her past experiences where she performed in all sorts (or perhaps only one sort) of venues for different audiences.

If the relationship between the comic and the audience, far from being a given, is created by the performer, it follows that the form and specifics of this relationship depend upon the comic's view of his or her audiences. The extent of his or her aggressiveness, responses to hecklers, indeed, his or her entire approach to performing is linked to what, at bottom, is an emotional-philosophical orientation towards audiences in general.

Not surprisingly, these orientations vary from comic to comic, ranging from positive to extremely unflattering, and all points in between. Views of audiences can change, depending upon the venue in which one performs and the clientele it tends to attract. However, comics do have definite opinions on audiences in general. Some feel that it is the audiences who dictate the pace and nature of the show, while others believe it is up to the comic to control her audiences at all times. Let us examine each view in more detail.

At the positive end of the spectrum, comics believe that audiences are composed of intelligent, empathetic individuals who will respond positively so long as the performer relates to them, striking that "familiar chord". This view is characterized by a sense of respect, and is one to which several comediennes interviewed adhered:

> I respect them enough not to treat them like idiots right off the bat. You know, I see a lot of comics come out and they insult the hell out

> of the audience for the first ten minutes. That's not what they came for.
>
> Luckily, I happen to perform in venues that bring in audiences that are just a touch more aware.

This last comment was made by a pro who shuns the mainstream club circuit. She feels strongly that as a performer, her primary obligation is to her audiences:

> You gotta remember too, it's all why we're up there. If you just wanna stand up there and masturbate, well go right ahead sir. And if you don't mind, I'll just order another drink and talk with my friend. And if you're up there to demand that I watch you masturbate, then I'll have difficulty. Now, if you're up there and you wanna make love with the audience, therein lies the difference. I think I wanna make love with the audience and I wanna come off looking like a good lover.

Comics who view their audiences with respect usually believe that their sole purpose is to please the audience. Consequently, they must be willing to switch gears if they sense they are losing the audience's interest and attention. A substantial number of comics in Fisher and Fisher's almost all male sample place the audience's needs first. One comic explains:

> I let my audiences dictate to me. They are in control. Fast or slow. It's how you wait for a laugh...I wait and listen. I see how they're responding to me. In harmony. I may be hating it. I may not be with it. Frustrated. But I never burden my audience. They don't know. They're to be entertained (1981:13).

The belief that it is the performer's duty to entertain and respond to the audience was shared by a few of the performers interviewed for this study. Interestingly enough, this view is especially pronounced among actresses and comics who have had improv training:

> Your first duty is to please the audience. Yeah, you have to improve yourself on stage and do something interesting, do something you feel is good, but at the same time, what you may feel is excellent, the audience may be going, 'Ahem.' So I think pleasing the audience is important.

> The audience has taken it's time to be there. And so you take your time to be there too and give them your time. And that's a fair exchange. They give you their patience and attention and so in strict fairness, that's exactly what you should give them.

At the other extreme is the belief that audiences are inherently stupid, lazy, boring and bored. Comics who hold this view may be inclined to take an aggressive, adversarial approach to performing. It should be noted that this less than complimentary outlook is a result of years of performing for audiences who, on the whole, are not very bright. A few comediennes interviewed for this study do not think highly of audiences:

> In --- they expect smut. And if you don't give it to them they hate it...I wouldn't work blue for them because I was mad at them and I said, 'No, I won't do it.'..And I had a really rough week.
>
> You have to give them broad hints. They're not coming to stretch their brains. They don't want to be intellectual but I think some of the brighter people probably enjoy having something where they think, 'Ha-ha, I get this,' rather than somebody jerking off...

It must be reiterated that in most cases, views of audiences are highly variable, depending upon the venues in which one performs and how successful one is. Although comics waver between both extremes, many remain partial to one particular view. Moreover, many comic performers view audiences with a great deal of ambivalence. For instance, one comedienne interviewed spoke at length about raising the standards of comedy, thereby implying that audiences are intelligent and mature enough to accept these standards. Yet, on the other hand, she draws an analogy between an audience and children's theatre, implying they are easily led. Consider both of her observations:

> I keep pitching out these balls and they're always going over their heads. But I'm gonna keep at it because it's my job to train the audience to think the way that I think. I know I have to slow down and this is gonna be a long process but it's my job to train them.

> I'm almost a teacher, they're all the little pupils and if you can play on their...on their sensitive nature, on their familiarity, you've got 'em by the balls. Always...I made them make cricket noises and rub their legs together. It was like a children's participation class and it worked wonderfully.

The advantage to dealing with children is that they are much more malleable and easily controlled. In my observations at comedy clubs, I have witnessed, time and again, seemingly rational individuals behave in certain ways at the request of the comic that they conceivably would not dream of doing in real life. Often the audience as a whole, through applause and verbal encouragement, persuades the person singled out by the performer to do as he or she is told. Here we see the group mind at work. Peer pressure helps to ensure audience involvement. The following is an example of individuals being controlled through this subtle pressure (from my fieldnotes):

> After randomly choosing a man and a woman from the front row, he (the comic) convinced them to sing a song suggested by the audience. Then he ordered the man, who complied, to lick a nearby table.

To convince people to behave in ways which they ordinarily find embarrassing, the comic's control must be legitimated by his or her role and prestige. When audience members behave in seemingly ridiculous fashion, they are legitimating the comic's status, a status which permits her to issue commands and control the behaviour of others.

It should be stressed that all comics, regardless of gender, must have the ability to control their audiences. If they do not have a minimum amount of control, if they cannot muster the necessary audience participation and involvement, the danger of failure becomes more acute. They must always keep in mind that audiences do have control over comics, particularly their ability to withhold both laughter and approval.

To sum up thus far, all performers depend on their audiences for approval, yet there is a wide range of attitudes towards them. Some comics insist on treating them

with loving kindness or, at the very least, with respect. It is these comics who are less likely to insult an audience with little or no provocation on their part. Having determined how comics view their audiences, we are now in a better position to understand their approaches towards them.

COMICS' APPROACHES TO AUDIENCES

The typology used to delineate orientations towards audiences applies to all comics regardless of gender. However, differences begin to appear when we examine how comics approach and subsequently treat their audiences. There is one basic distinction which seems to apply almost without exception: female comics rarely insult their audiences without just cause. Insulting people is an approach which many male comics, who come out and promptly pick on individuals in the audience, seem to favour. A feminist comic describes her dislike of such methods:

> There are comedians you can sit in the audience with and you feel that you have to put your hand up over your face to protect yourself, and that is the feeling I loathe the most. That is where I would like to incorporate assertiveness into my performance as opposed to aggressiveness. Aggressiveness leads to war.

Insulting audience members seems to be a way to ward off challenges to one's authority claims; irrevocable proof that one is in charge. Another comedienne comments on this overly aggressive tactic by imitation:

> 'Boy, do you have an ugly dress on!' 'Hey, where'd you get that bald head?' No, no, I don't do that.

In my observations, I rarely witnessed female comics begin their routines by insulting audience members. (In fact, this occurred only once.) The following examples

from my fieldnotes, show two very different entrances, the first by a male comic, the second by a comedienne:

> Introduced as a man with an attitude, R. was aggressive, as was immediately apparent in the tone of his voice. His interaction with the audience was often tinged with sarcasm...When a man's reply to a question about his age was, '39 and holding,' R. asked, 'Should I cut you in half and count the fucking rings?'...When someone did not adequately answer his question he asked, 'Could you be a little more fucking vague?'

> After her name had been announced and the applause had ended, there were several seconds of complete silence. The audience heard her arguing with the emcee, 'Stop pushing me. O.K.,O.K., I'm coming. Geeze, the pressure.' She came out slowly, hesitantly, and after a hello, pulled out a camera, explaining this was for her mother. To one man she said, 'Lick your lips,' and he complied. Then she asked the audience to 'Scrunch together. Lick your lips. Closer, I'm having trouble fitting you all in.'

What are we to make of these different approaches? To understand this, we must return to the notion, first introduced in chapter three, of comedy as having a male defined structure. The "full frontal attack" strategy used by many male comics can be termed a "masculine" approach to audiences. In contrast, many (but certainly not all) female comics, as part of their attempt, whether conscious or not, to redefine standup comedy, approach their audiences as friends rather than foes. It can be argued that this may well be a result of gender socialization. Girls are taught, from day one, to be "nice" - caring, sympathetic and sensitive to the needs of others (Mackie, 1987:91). It is quite possible that this socialization has an effect on how comediennes go about establishing a rapport with their audiences. Most of the women interviewed for this study try to win their audiences over with kindness. Some project energy and enthusiasm while others come on more quietly:

> The first thing is, you have to get them on your side, because if you fail, they're still gonna be with you. So the way I do this is, I usually go out and I'm usually real perky, full of energy. And it's a big 'Hello' to everyone, smiles, teeth, 'How's everyone doing tonight? You

> feeling good?' that sort of thing. So just basically get them in a good mood, let them feed off my energy to get them up.
>
> A lot of times I come out quiet...I do it because I'm scared. I do it because I'm nervous. Yeah. I go, 'Hi, everybody. Huh.' And then I kind of sit on the chair quietly and look around. [low voice] 'I guess I better get going with this thing that I'm supposed to do.'
>
> I come out with a pleasant, naive approach, so that they like me, so that they're not taken aback by the fact that I'm a woman, and I don't want them to pay too much attention to it. I want them to quickly get the point that I am just a person like themselves, and I have weaknesses, more weaknesses than strengths, and then I talk about them, and they identify with me, and they sympathize with me. And then I get into the heavier material.

Here we see all the themes which go into winning over an audience and ensuring likability: overcoming the barriers created by social distance, exposing one's vulnerability as a person, playing on common human frailty. However, as the last quote above illustrates, winning over an audience can be much more difficult for women because of potential resistance or even hostility toward women as comics. In the next section we shall examine some of these attitudes and see how comediennes cope with and overcome this bias.

AUDIENCE REACTION TO FEMALE COMICS

Comediennes complain that some audience members see them as women first and comics second, or even worse, cannot see them as comics at all simply because they are women. This is a source of frustration to several of the comic performers interviewed for this study:

> You get guys who just don't want you to be funny. I've never seen women who didn't want me to be funny. And I have a lot more women coming up to me and saying, 'You were good,' than men.
>
> There's a lot of audiences that are going to be alienated by the fact that a woman is up there at all. And you can sense it. These straight

> faces, not even a smile...I come out and their faces drop. And they clap and it's a short clap and they've got straight faces. And I do my first line and the women aren't laughing and the men aren't gonna laugh, I'm in trouble. But I just continue. And I just try to kill them with kindness. And that is the most exciting thing - winning an audience over when they don't want to like you and at the end you make them like you.

In this last quote we begin to see the connection between the power and control inherent in standup comedy and the resistance to female comics. Historically, in virtually every era, every field, every endeavour, men have claimed an almost God-given, "natural" right to dominate and control others (Spender,1980). Our social structure is such that there are few opportunities and places where women can get together and make their views known. This is not accidental, as Spender (1980) explains, for to let women speak is tantamount to losing control over them, to having the image of male superiority exposed as exactly that - image. Women speaking is a very real threat to patriarchal order:

> Male supremacy is a carefully cultivated cultural construct that makes it seem 'reasonable' that males should be the dominant group. If these beliefs are exposed as fraudulent then the rationale for the existence of the dominant group is threatened (Spender, 1980:114).

When women take the stage and speak into the microphone demanding to be heard, they are upsetting a one-sided balance of power which, traditionally, has favoured men. As far as speaking in public is concerned, as late as the second half of the eighteenth century, the privilege of oratory was forbidden to women (Spender, 1980:52). Vestiges of this prohibition still remain, if only in the minds of some people. When these people are part of comedy club audiences, they display hostility toward female comics. One comedienne interviewed describes a particularly aggravating encounter with a male audience member:

> One time I was doing a feature and this man came up to me in the audience and he said he didn't come all week because he saw it was a woman's name on the marquee but he's finally seen me and he's really glad he came because I was really good. And I told him, 'Thank you but no thank you because that's a real terrible prejudice to hold over my head because I'm a woman and I hope you learned your lesson. It doesn't mean that much to me that you like me because you didn't like me without meeting me.' And he walked away.

Given this resistance (which does not happen all the time), it follows that sometimes women must be even better than men in order to prove and justify their right to be on stage. Two amateur comics interviewed were sensitized to the different standards by which female comics are judged:

> There was a headliner, M...She wasn't an amateur by any sense of the word and she still had problems with the male ego. I could feel the hostility behind me and around me.
>
> Women have to prove themselves more. I don't care what any man says, how much he argues against it, but it's true. There's a double standard on stage. It's much harder for women to convince the audience.

This relates to the idea, introduced in chapter 4, that women are simply not as funny as men. Women who work in various facets of comedy other than standup have also confronted similar prejudice, as these British and American women confirm:

> You have to be much better than the men because if you're only just as good, they're still going to go to the man (Collier and Beckett, 1980:92).
>
> When I started, women were not supposed to be particularly funny, women were just supposed to be the foil...And I think audiences had a slight built-in resentment of women being funny. Women were losing their dignity by being in comedy things (Banks and Swift, 1987:62).

The battle comediennes wage to justify (to audiences) their presence in a male bastion is not unique to comedy but common to women who enter other non-traditional fields. The literature dealing with women in comedy offers evidence of this double

standard emanating from audiences. The first quote below describes a British comedienne's experience, and the second is from Louie Anderson, a popular male American comedian:

> I did a stag once in Newcastle and it was lunchtime, all men...There were all these heaving, drunken rugby players, mashed potatoes all over the walls. I walked on, there was a stunned silence and one of them lurched to his feet and shouted, 'We want tits!' and they all fell about, as is their wont. My retort, God knows where it came from, was, 'You'd look bright with tits' (Banks and Swift, 1987:14).

> Media critics' hostile reaction to Joan Rivers' late-night talk show highlights the difficulties facing women in comedy he [Anderson] said. 'They don't want her to be successful. They're siding with Johnny [Carson]. There's almost a hatred generated...But if another man had done a show opposite Johnny, there wouldn't have been that same hatred' (The Montreal Gazette, April 27, 1987).

Granted, reactions to female comics are not always this severe. Nevertheless, according to the comediennes interviewed, there are perceptible differences in how audiences react to male and female comics. Moreover, many women maintained that their material at times elicits different responses from male and female audience members. They believe this is probably because women implicitly understand where their humour is coming from. Since women can instantly relate, they are more likely to judge comedienne's material as genuinely funny:

> What I can tell is, mostly the women are more apt to be receptive to me and my ideas. It's probably because it's coming from a woman's point of view. They go, 'Oh, yeah, I can relate.'

> I think, 'Is that just funny to me or is it gonna be funny to everyone?' Mainly men because I think a lot of my jokes are geared to women. Women generally think that the show is funny. Whereas men are more likely to feel that it isn't.

The issue is not female chauvinism, nor a complete inability of both sexes to understand and share each others' humour. Simply put, when comediennes share observations and personal experiences, chances are, women in the audience have had

similar experiences. Humour often comes from the familiarity of the subject matter. Undoubtedly, men find women unamusing because they have little, if any, knowledge of a female subculture. Turning to the literature, this awareness is discussed by women who work in the comedy field. For instance, in Spare Ribs (1980), Anne Beatts voices her preference for working with other female comedy writers because, "There is a woman's culture that men just don't know about" (Collier and Beckett, 1980:24). Two of the comics interviewed for this study elaborate on this special understanding that women often share:

> Now women understand an entire subtext dealing with sanitary napkins: procuring them, hiding them, wearing a sturdy cotton brief in the event that you're found without a belt, and this was well before the adhesive strips, that whole, 'Oh, my God...' Women are my favourite audiences. Women laugh like crazy. And women laugh at all the secret things they haven't been able to say in a million years.
>
> Even if there wasn't a difference [between male and female humour], they'd believe me more because it's happening to me...And besides, the angle is a little bit different. Guys talk about those commercials like, 'Oh, aren't they so offensive to us guys, all those women doing somersaults out the door. I'm using it as a coffee filter,' that sort of thing. That's their angle. Mine is, 'Aren't those commercials stupid because you know what we really go through.'
>
> I try to make the material work for both sexes although it must come from my point of view...The women like my stuff better, but then again, I like other women better than I like other men.

Sometimes comediennes play on this secret knowledge by appealing directly to the women in the audience. This process of identification is a virtual guarantee of laughter, the idea being that they are sharing an inside joke:

> I sometimes say, 'You know girls, when that happens,' but I try and keep that to a minimum.
>
> I play on it sometimes. 'Come on ladies, you can clap with me, you're gonna agree with me - guys are the biggest puppies in the whole world.' Or, 'See, you guys in a bar...' You see a lot of women clapping at that. And of course, I pull out the pad and I'm on their side right

> off the bat...I come out and say, 'T. was talking about pads earlier. Doesn't that make you sick when guys make jokes about pads?' Right away I'm on their side.

It should be noted that just as there are comediennes who believe their brand of humour will necessarily appeal to women more so than men, there are many others who are equally adamant that there is no such thing as "women's humour". Joan Rivers says:

> There is no 'women's humour'. If something is funny, it's funny...I'm a woman, I know I'm a woman, so the humour that comes out of me is going to be from my point of view (Collier and Beckett, 1980:7).

Be that as it may, on the next page Rivers is quoted as saying that since most of her material deals with marriage, housework and children, she cannot perform for an all male audience:

> You need women to relate to because the men relate to you through the women they are with and then they go forward (ibid:8).

Several of the comediennes interviewed for this study would probably agree with Rivers' second assessment. Their material, while appreciated by both sexes, may be appreciated for different reasons. Here they talk about an interesting observation which they had made: how the laughter from men and women sometimes comes in totally different places:

> Men laugh in different places and the women laugh where I would laugh. Or the women laugh where I want them to laugh and the men laugh either because the women are laughing, or in different places.
>
> They'll [women] look at the men they're with to see if they're laughing and if it's O.K. to laugh. Or sometimes the men will laugh while the women won't.
>
> Sometimes the women like me more than the men, sometimes the men like me more than the women. The women who don't like me are usually the women who are very subservient to their men and con-

> trolled by their men in life. The women who laugh at me are the women who go, 'Aw, come on, John, let's go out tonight. Well, if you're not, I'm going anyway.' The woman who goes, 'Well, I can't go out because my boyfriend said we have to stay home,' those aren't the women who laugh at me.

Thus, how freely women react in comedy clubs - the strength of their applause and heartiness of their laughter - may very well be tied to gender socialization. How "ladylike" is it to laugh loudly and slap one's knee in mirth? Turning to the literature for corroboration with the above quotes on laughter coming in different forms from men and women , we find comedy writers and performers relating similar observations. The first quote is from a performer who clearly overstepped the boundaries by doing a skit on Dr. Sheryl Kinsey teaching women how to fake orgasms. The second is from a comedy writer who talks about laughter in male/female audiences:

> I could hear the women wanting to applaud but holding back, probably because they were with their husbands (Collier and Beckett, 1980:220).
>
> I find that there'll be in the mixed [audiences], a laugh from the men, a pause, and then a back laugh from the women (ibid:28).

Comediennes, especially the pros who have had much experience performing in all types of venues for various types of audiences, are usually confident and skilled enough to please the audience regardless of the actual situation in which they find themselves. If laughter is sparse, a comic will dig into her bag of tricks, sometimes switching topics completely, to bring the audience back. Having established a rapport, she is in tune with their likes and needs. But what happens if someone else decides to challenge her? How does she deal with such threats? These are questions which we shall take up in the next and final sections of this chapter.

DEALING WITH DISTRACTIONS

A set of antennae is a valuable asset for a comic, enabling her to avert potential trouble. Comic performers must be aware of any distractions, no matter how minor, before they turn into full blown disaster. Any challenge to their performances must be dealt with so that they can reassert their control. This orientation is not merely an alarmist, knee-jerk reaction. Teachers, for instance, know all too well how quickly misbehaviour, if not contained, spreads (Martin, 1976:173). This is why teachers must be well prepared and should not falter or hesitate in the delivery of their lessons.

The same admonitions apply to performers. In fact, one of the reasons comics put so much effort into rehearsing and perfecting their routines is so they can put on a good show and lessen the chance of audience dissent or apathy.

But what does the comic do when faced with minor distractions, let alone heckling? The dilemma is this: should he or she respond to minor disruptions, thereby calling attention to them, or should he or she continue his or her set and ignore these problems, hoping they will go unnoticed or disappear? The following comment by a pro comedienne describes the deliberations involved in the attempt to deal competently with this type of situation:

> Last night I had a table in front of me that were passing around hash. It was a joint. They were having fun but they were talking too loudly and the whole problem is that you have to decide, 'Should I pick on these people and call attention to them or talk to the other 98% of the people who are listening?' But then it disrupts you very much. I stepped on my own jokes too, to drown out the guy who was talking.

The above comic chose to ignore these people because while they were distracting her, they were neither loud nor obvious enough to distract the audience as a whole from enjoying the show. Other comics can and do choose to embarrass those who distract them. A frequent occurrence is patrons who walk directly past the stage

on their way to the washrooms. Many comics feel compelled to remark aloud, "Sure, go piss during my set," and to ask when the individual returns, "Did you hear us in there?" 'Cause we heard you."

How comics choose to deal with minor distractions is left up to their own discretion. Many will not respond unless they perceive the behaviour to be a threat to their performance. However, heckling, a prospect which strikes fear in the hearts of amateurs and many pros, is not something which they can easily ignore, and it is to this threat that we now turn our full attention.

HECKLING: GENDER STYLE RESPONSES

While the comic can and often does ignore those people who are merely lost in their own worlds, the man or woman who yells rude remarks poses a direct challenge to both the comic's sense of control and the impression which she has so carefully created. Once the challenge has been issued, the audience waits, often with baited breath, for the comic's response. And comics know their credibility rests on how effectively and competently they handle this situation.

Before we describe the various responses towards hecklers, we must be clear on two related issues. These are, first, the genuine fear and/or annoyance which hecklers arouse in the comic, and secondly, the psychology behind heckling. Let us deal with the latter issue first.

Veteran pros who have been performing for a number of years no longer fear hecklers because of their own psychological savvy. They have reached the logical conclusion that for the most part, hecklers are insecure people who long to be the centre of attention and believe they are funny but lack the courage to perform on

stage. Consequently, they yell out witty and not-so-witty remarks under cover of darkness, in a crowd where they are not easily identified. I have noticed how often a comic's request that a heckler repeat the remark and identify him or herself was met with total silence. Clearly, the individual's momentary bravado had faded away when challenged to match wits with the professional on stage. In the following comments, performers interviewed analyze what they believe makes a heckler tick:

> I've been in a show, actually, it was a comedy, and we had people shouting out stuff. One night they were really bad. They were just a bunch of people who came in and the rest of the audience was annoyed by it. Therefore, the only reason they were doing it was to be funny to themselves. Occasionally you get someone who is genuinely bored by the play and wants to create a reaction, get a reaction from the actors.
>
> Most hecklers are frustrated comedians in a way. I've sort of analyzed them and I think more times than not, what they are is, they are the man or the woman at the table with their friends and they are used to getting the attention or they are used to being the funny one. See, some guy goes out with his friends and they're watching a show and all of a sudden, these friends that usually laugh at him, they're all giving their attention to somebody else, they're all laughing at this guy, and he has sort of been usurped. So he wants to get in on the action or something, to prove that maybe he's as smart as the guy on stage.
>
> Well, most times, the people that heckle are the ones that feel, 'Yeah, I think I'm pretty funny.' But he just doesn't have the guts to go up there and do it. Like, he'll do it in the darkness where he can't really be attacked because he has all these cushions around him.

Understanding why an individual heckles and seeing it as a basic weakness, an expression of insecurity, makes pro comics more confident in their ability to handle hecklers. However, the fear of being heckled looms large in the consciousness of amateurs. Some novices actually race through their routines so that no one will be able to get a word in edgewise. This was the case for a British duo:

> Heckling is a hazard and a challenge for comedians in a wide variety of venues and the modern alternative cabarets are no exception. Some performers thrive on it, others dread it. The female double act, French

> and Saunders...did not relish the prospect of heckling. If they sensed it was imminent, they would try to prevent interruption by doing the act very fast - they once got through a twenty minute set in five minutes (Banks and Swift, 1987:14).

The strong dread at the mere hint of heckling is not without just cause, for heckling can destroy the definition of the situation and cast serious doubts as to who is in charge. All performers, including those whose general approach is far from aggressive, are adamant about the necessity of controlling the situation. Again, to quote from the literature:

> I don't believe you have to be aggressive to do standup but you have to get them on your side in a way. I suppose you just choose the way you feel is best. You certainly have to dominate them but that's a technical thing. Any performer has to make contact with the audience and be in charge (Banks and Swift, 1987:14).

> A comic on stage must be in command, an authoritarian figure. I have to be the toughest one in the room or they will talk right through me (Rivers, 1986:55).

All comics try to remain in control at all times but not all of them view heckling as inherently negative. Depending upon the context and what is actually being said, a comment from an audience member may be complimentary or amusing without being offensive. A few of the performers interviewed for this study clarify this view:

> Usually I find it very funny, actually...In this particular instance, we had quite a few people shout out some really stupid things but it was funny because I thought they were being funny. It wasn't a situation where I was upset at being heckled because if I'd been in the audience, I'd probably be thinking, 'Ah, no, I don't believe this!'

> I don't mind hecklers if they are not vicious.

> Actually, sometimes hecklers have been really positive - audience members make jokes or they agree.

Clearly, how performers respond to hecklers depends in part on the nature of the comments made. Amusing remarks are sometimes repeated by the comic for the benefit of the rest of the audience. However, vicious insults hurled at the comic are another matter entirely.

Traditionally, old-timers advise amateurs to slam hecklers before they get out of hand. Yet, one of the most striking themes to emerge out of this study was the fact that not all female comics believe in responding to hecklers in a crude, vulgar or nasty manner. This abhorrence of cutting people down with ruthless invective may very well be tied to broader gender socialization. Generally, in the public sphere the male approach to conflict has been characterized by one-upmanship. The emphasis is on individual power and the suppression of challenges to one's authority claims. On the other hand, evidence suggests that women adopt a more co-operative approach in dealing with conflict. They are more likely to talk things over with subordinates and superiors until a compromise is reached (Spender,1980).

When we examine how comediennes respond to hecklers, yet another typology emerges. At one extreme are performers, especially those who work in tougher clubs or "dives", who match and top insults with hecklers. At the other end are performers who ignore hecklers completely, speaking even louder into the microphone to drown them out. In between are a variety of reactions, from mild scolding to teasing to maneuvering the audience into forcing hecklers to quiet down.

We shall begin by examining the traditional, and by extension, male defined tactic of "slamming" hecklers. This strategy is employed most frequently in "macho dives" where the battle lines are drawn between audience and performer, with the latter literally having to struggle for the former's attention. Here hecklers represent a serious challenge to the comic's authority, one which she must respond to if she wishes to retain the audience's respect. The following comments, the first from an amateur

who was nearly destroyed by a heckler and the others from pros, stress the importance of remaining in charge by "slamming" hecklers:

> He was just being really rude and I allowed him to take up too much space in the show. You should, I think, be able to blip the guy out of existence if at all possible. But I allowed him to continue. That was the first time. I won't let that happen again.
>
> It's like a horse or an animal - if they can smell fear, they're gonna eat you alive. So you don't be frightened.
>
> You have to be in control. That's all it is up there. It's all that is. And some people do poorly not because they don't have good material, but they don't have control. It's especially important for a woman. You have to be in complete control. If they feel you're losing it and you're not in control, they go for the throat.
>
> When someone heckles, what the audience wants is for you to put them in their place. Because if you lose control, if you can't say anything, there's no hope in hell for you up there. You gotta be able to go, 'One for me, zero for you, shut the fuck up.' You gotta make sure you put them down.

Aside from stressing the necessity of slamming hecklers, this last quote brings out an important element: how the rest of the audience reacts to hecklers. Responding to a heckler is not just a private matter between the comic and one unruly individual. The outcome of this duel has a bearing on how the audience as a whole and as individuals will behave. They may redefine the situation and decide that they too can disrupt, or that the comic is not worthy of their attention. Again, this brings to mind classroom analogies. If teachers do not deal firmly with a pupil who challenges their authority, the rest of the class may follow suit. (This is when spitballs start flying across the room.) Waller writes:

> When punishment is successful, it redefines the situation by imposing a taboo on certain aberrant behaviour (1932:201).

In the case of comic performers, if control is maintained and the comic gains the upper hand, chances are the audience will have learned its lesson and there will be

no more major disruptions. Thus, a comic, by punishing and ostracizing the offender, uses him or her as an example of what will happen to anyone else who dares to challenge her authority. Conversely, if the heckler is allowed to take over, other people in the audience may begin talking, interrupting and heckling. The result may be anarchy, which would prematurely end the performance.

How do comics who believe in slamming hecklers respond to them? Most use standard heckle lines renowned for their crude viciousness. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes is a "play-by-play" rendition of an insult match which took place between a female heckler and a male comic:

> The first time she yelled out an insulting remark, the audience laughed at her cleverness. Q's response was, 'It could have been a good show tonight, but no, your parents had to fuck. [She called out another remark.] He said, 'They take shots at the Pope, at Reagan - they can't spare one bullet for this bitch.' The audience burst into applause. After her rebuttal he immediately came back with, 'If you were the last woman on earth I'd start fucking men. I'm kidding - I wouldn't fuck at all.' While the audience laughed at the heckler's comments, with each of Q's comebacks they laughed, cheered and applauded. In this battle for control, each time his authority was challenged, he won it back. The audience was clearly on his side.

Thus, a popular method of dealing with hecklers is by fighting fire with fire. Yet, and this is a crucial point, dispensing with hecklers and getting the audience to remain on their side need not involve such aggressive, war-like tactics. The following example describes how one female pro dealt with an unruly heckler. Her tone was matter-of-fact rather than hostile, (in contrast to the example noted above):

> She turned to him and said, 'Guys like you make selective breeding attractive.' When he persisted, she informed him, 'Men who heckle have small penises.'

Ultimately, how comics respond to hecklers may once again be tied to gender socialization. In her analysis of managerial styles, Lipman-Blumen (1980) points out

that for men, the focus is on successfully accomplishing the organization's goals. Through competitive games, boys are socialized into this ethic of competition and winning (Lipman-Blumen, 1980:347). Women, however, have been socialized to appreciate personal relationships above all else. Even in play, girls may purposely let each other win so as not to destroy the relationship. Thus, "women learn to value personal relationships, to rank their importance above simple task-orientation and winning" (Lipman-Blumen, 1980:349). Given this difference in orientation, it follows that for the average male comic, the exchange between himself and hecklers is a competition which he must win at all costs. Conversely, since women are concerned with the existence and quality of interpersonal relationships rather than with winning, they are less likely to take a confrontative approach to hecklers.

Indeed, several of the comediennes in my sample viewed crude responses as unnecessary. Furthermore, they believe such harsh comebacks are alienating to the general audience.

Their distrust of such methods also stems from their orientation to and view of audiences. But the question of how to respond to hecklers goes even deeper as it relates to the responsibility connected with control. In The Negotiated Order of The School, Martin (1976) defines power as both a process and a property. He notes that many teachers are reluctant to use their power arbitrarily for fear of seriously disrupting the rapport they have with their pupils. It is this rapport which is, "needed to create an atmosphere conducive to academic and social development," and furthermore, "cannot be established when the social distance between teachers and pupils is conspicuous" (1976:49).

In a similar vein, comics who refrain from exerting power over hecklers in a crude and negative way are wary of disrupting the rapport they have carefully established and maintained up until this point with their audiences. Rather than risk

alienating everyone in the club, many comediennes deal with hecklers by turning to their audiences for support and understanding. The following quotes from comics interviewed for this study provide examples of this strategy:

> I've only been heckled a few times. The few times that I've responded to hecklers I turned to the audience and reminded them of Grade 3 recess and said [little girl's voice] 'You know when a boy likes you? He punches you.' Because what happens is, I go to the audience... The audience will laugh because it's exactly that; 'Hey, I need to be noticed! Hey, you bitch, blah, blah, blah.' 'Oh, yeah? Do you like me? Do you have a present for me? Do you wanna punch me in the arm, right here, as hard as you can and run away?'

> I used to be an English teacher. So I'll stare them down and talk over them.

> What tends to work for me is, instead of alienating my audience with some crude comeback like, 'Hey, buddy, do I pull the dicks out of your mouth when you work?' instead of doing that I tend to take my audience in. So let's say someone yells something out I'll go, 'I'm really embarrassed - that's my father here this evening.' So I sort of turn the tables and I bring them into my circle instead of pushing them out.

The similarity in the above strategies is that all three of these women, instead of perceiving their audiences as enemies, turn to them for support. While this strategy is not exclusive to women, it is a more typically feminine approach to dealing with power and conflict. In essence, they try to isolate the heckler by confiding in the audience - isn't he or she obnoxious and aren't we all annoyed by him or her? - and asking for their cooperation. This is yet another reason why it is imperative that the comic gets the audience on her side as soon as possible. If the audience as a whole likes her, they will not put up with hecklers either. This is exactly what some performers count on, that either the individual in question will eventually tone down, or the audience will get annoyed enough to turn on him or her. A few of the comic performers interviewed elaborate on how audiences can be of help:

> If you're gonna go, 'Look, you, shut up!' you're just gonna get them mad and then you're gonna get the audience unhappy at you because no matter how much trouble they're having with this guy, they're gonna be more upset at you for attacking an audience member. So it [responding] has to be done fairly good-naturedly.
>
> The thing about dealing with hecklers is, you have to get the audience on your side. If you just scream at them, if you come down too hard, it becomes like a teacher screaming at a class. You've gotta get the audience on your side.
>
> I know if I'm in the audience I wanna see an act. And I've done it many times where I had the audience tell the guy to shut up, or throw him out.

At the other end of the spectrum, some comediennes believe that the best strategy, at least initially, is to completely ignore hecklers. If all these disturbers wish to do is prove how funny they are, ignoring them is the perfect way to deny their humour, if not their very existence. Like restless pupils who just want attention, hecklers who are ignored will often tire of shouting into thin air. However, performers admit that this strategy can backfire, especially if hecklers seriously disturb the rest of the audience and interfere with the overall enjoyment of the show. Whether a comic ignores hecklers or chooses another strategy ultimately comes down to her definition of the situation at that moment. Often, it is a matter of making an appropriate judgement call. Some of the comediennes interviewed discuss both their preference for the "ignore them" strategy and its risks:

> I'm not good at comebacks so I just tend to ignore it...I think if someone shouts out one thing you can ignore it and probably should ignore it, but if it would disrupt the scene less for you to come out and heckle back, just get them to shut up, I think you should do it if they're really being distracting.
>
> Sometimes I just continue with what I'm doing...ignore the fact that they're out there and hope they shut up. It works in the fact that the audience sees you're trying so the audience will be on your side, the rest of the audience. And they'll be turning around, embarrassed for him...Sometimes, if they're the ones that don't shut up and they keep going on, there's the risk of them getting the audience on their side

> and sort of laughing along with them, and that is the worst situation to be in because it's so hard to pull yourself out of once that happens.

The key to handling hecklers is flexibility and confidence. From my observations, it appears that most comics (male and female) will either ignore or gently tease a person after the first heckle. Beyond this point, the traditional, masculine style response is to lash out and slam hecklers. In general, how comics wish to respond is left to their individual discretion. Much depends on the audience, the venue, the comic's confidence level, definition of the situation, philosophy and approach towards audiences in general. One veteran pro remained adamant about ignoring hecklers. She voiced strong disapproval of what, all too often, becomes a battle of wits between comics and individuals in their audiences. Her views on the subject are worth quoting in full because they represent such a stark contrast to the typical, male defined notion of slamming hecklers:

> If someone is heckling me without objects, I don't respond to it. Because that breaks up the whole act. My whole thing is the rhythm of what I'm saying and the climax, I'm building to a climax with my jokes and if I stop to take the time - I mean, if it's a certain situation where nothing's gonna work anyway, sure I'll step out of character and do that stuff - but that takes time. And then you have to get back into the joke and people are wondering about, 'Oh, what is he gonna say next? And what is she gonna say next?' So people have forgotten that you're a standup comic instead of a retaliator...I've advised some younger comics not to get out of it. Because I've seen them get out of their routine and just get into a verbal battle and never do their jokes again. And it's insulting. All they do is insult each other and the audience is left out.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the sometimes complex, always dynamic interaction between a comedienne and her audiences. It is here that the issue of control is played out to its fullest. While it is true that comics must retain control over their performances and

the entire definition of the situation, there are various methods used to exercise this control. Many comediennes try to exert control in as unaggressive a manner as possible, rebelling against the traditional, insulting power trips advocated by many male comics. Here again, we see how women, through their subjective perceptions of objective conditions and their own ideological orientations, attempt to inject more typically feminine traits into their interaction with audiences.

This chapter has also illustrated that audiences have their own situational definitions and they exercise a considerable amount of influence over the comic, who must, at all times, be aware of their reactions and responsive to their needs. These factors, coupled with the cultural idea that women should not be too aggressive causes one author to conclude that:

> Dealing with the audience also requires some finesse. Women agree that standup comedy is, in itself, an aggressive act; making someone laugh means exerting control, even power. But a woman cannot come off as overaggressive or she will lose the audience (Klein, 1984:125).

Chapter 7: CONCLUSION

The nature of standup comedy can be coarse and brutal. In this emotionally demanding occupation, those who are too sensitive, unable to accept criticism and the inevitability of possible humiliation and failure, will not survive. Perhaps this is one reason why so few women (and men) choose to be comics. However, those who do make this choice must work within a male defined structure and language which has left little room for sensitivity among its practitioners. The resulting objective constraints facing most female standups include isolation, discrimination and sexism.

Given that standup comedy has been historically restrictive to women, the female presence in this highly masculine world continues to cause considerable confusion. Management allows women into the field and then appears to be at a loss as to how to treat them. Audiences recoil visibly if a comedienne comes on too strongly, (the hostility vented towards Joan Rivers being a classic example of this phenomenon). Male comics often feel threatened by and jealous of these female "intruders". Comediennes themselves are seen as women first, comics second. We have examined each of these elements in turn, noting the isolation of women in the field, their exasperation in confronting the sexism of their male colleagues, the various impression management strategies they must use to be accepted by colleagues and audiences alike, and their overriding desire to be judged according to the same criterion as male comics: talent.

We cannot, however, do justice to an analysis of objective constraints faced by standup comediennes if we limit it to the micro order of comedy clubs, divorcing it from the larger society of which it is a part. What actually transpires in these clubs, as well as the perceptions of its inhabitants, are shaped by our culture. A central theme in patriarchal culture is the belief that men are naturally more aggressive than

women; that a woman in control is unladylike, unfeminine and ultimately dangerous. Herein lies the root cause of resentment directed at female standup comics: the fear, reinforced by gender socialization, that if women assume control, patriarchy will no longer be viable.

Hence, this thesis began with the fundamental premise that standup comedy involves control. The comic must have complete control over his or her routine, image and performance. In this respect, the job is no different from many others. However, the comic extends this control to his or her entire audience, for the very act of making others laugh implies controlling their emotions, thoughts and reactions.

In chapters five and six, we saw very clearly how comics exert control over their own performances and their audiences. Indeed, the entire learning process comics go through - perfecting their timing and delivery, developing their style, editing and reworking their jokes, coping with setbacks while remaining confident on stage- requires a tremendous amount of discipline and self-control. However, such diligent preparation is still no guarantee of success, for the true test of their abilities comes with their performances before live audiences. Faced with the threat of rejection or usurption, the standup comic must remain in charge. To do otherwise and lose control is to lose the audience completely.

Flowing from this equation of comedy with control is a further perception of standup comedy as aggressive. These two concepts of control and aggression make standup comedy an especially difficult occupation for women. This is not necessarily due to personal difficulties in dealing with aggression, but social pressures on women to act in feminine, "ladylike" ways. Patriarchy insists that aggressive behaviour is inappropriate for women and this notion is both reinforced and internalized through the process of gender socialization. Thus, comediennes soon discover that their choice of occupation makes their femininity suspect, and they feel compelled to develop various

impression management strategies to soften this "dyke" myth. They take pains to be less crude, to stay away from taboo topics, to dress and act in ways which simultaneously make them appear less threatening, and deflect attention away from their sexuality.

As if these added pressures and considerations are not enough to contend with, standup comediennes must somehow juggle some contradictory demands: those of the profession, which require power, competence and authority, and those of the public which insist that a woman remain feminine at all times. It is no wonder then, that female comics agonize over how to dress, what to say (in terms of the content of their material), and how to behave without alienating their audiences while still remaining "tough" and in control.

Gender socialization, as conceived by a patriarchal order, imposes restrictions and limitations on women, especially those who enter male bastions. Yet, paradoxically, it is this very gender socialization which many comediennes use to "humanize" the world of standup comedy. In replacing aggression with assertiveness, in moving away from putdown to what some feminists call "pickup" humour, in refusing to antagonize or do battle with audiences and de-emphasizing confrontation, they are injecting typically feminine traits into a harsh, masculine structure. Even those who remain aggressive in the male tradition disassociate themselves from its more extreme forms.

THEORETICAL AND SUBSTANTIVE IMPLICATIONS

This thesis probes into the lives and social worlds of standup comediennes, an area explored in popular culture but left untouched by social scientists. Sociological forays into humour have focused on the nature of humour and play, the functions of humour in social interaction and the meaning of jokes. Rarely has the attempt been made to analyze comics as humour producers. As the first sociological exploration of the social world of female comics in Canada, this thesis is unique. While popular literature has contributed a great deal to our understanding of what it means to be a female comic in a male world, this thesis is also distinguished by an analysis which links standup comedy to questions of gender and power. As soon as a woman is introduced as a female comic, her gender becomes an issue, her femininity is questioned. I have suggested that the perception of comediennes as somehow unfeminine is linked to cultural prohibitions against aggression and control in women. Moreover, if we accept that power is a relationship (as opposed to an attribute), it remains true that women are expected to submit to, rather than exercise power.

Throughout this study, I have purposely avoided a more general discussion of humour since this topic alone could fill another thesis. However, given that standup comedy is a form of humour, a few comments are in order. It has long been a contention of mine that humour, in demonstrating the absurdity of taken-for-granted reality, is a potential threat to established order. A classic example of humour as subversive is political satire, which, by exposing the hypocrisy of those in power, indicates that people are not as easily fooled as the elite would like them to be. In a similar vein, there are standup comediennes who subtly use humour to expose society's absurdities and contradictions, illustrating that patriarchy itself is nothing more than a sham. Feminist comediennes may not be as subtle simply because:

> The persistent attitude that underlies feminist humour is the attitude of social revolution - that is, we are ridiculing a social system that can be, that must be changed (Kaufman, 1980:13).

The very idea of women using humour to criticize the existing social order is threatening in itself. Moreover, because a sense of humour is such a highly valued social attribute, the witty person quickly becomes the centre of attention. It is striking how, often, if that witty person is a woman, men in the group feel uncomfortable and/or threatened. This whole question of the power of humour (in daily interaction), particularly in relation to gender, needs further research. We need to know how humour operates in mixed groups. What happens at a party when the blonde young woman tells a joke? Is there an uncomfortable silence from the men (and/or the women)? Who laughs, who is shocked and is this divided along gender lines?

In addition to an examination of humour, there are various other areas worth exploring. Specifically, within Canada, what are the differences and similarities between francophone and anglophone comics? Do francophone female comics encounter the same type of resistance as their anglophone counterparts? In what way can these differences (if any) be attributed to differences in French and English cultures?

In limiting my focus to female standup comics, I was unable to compare the perceptions, philosophies and feelings of male and female comics. Future research should take a comparative approach to determine how gender socialization affects male comics. Moreover, such a comparative analysis would offer much insight as to gender differences between male and female comics not only in terms of material, but femininity, masculinity and control.

Another area for further research is the whole question of whether or not there is such a thing as "pink collar" humour. My own research strongly suggests that comediennes' routines reflect their experiences, experiences which are coloured by the fact that they are women operating in a patriarchal society. Perhaps a quantitative

content analysis of male and female comics' routines would show more conclusively, that even though they deal with similar topics, there are tangible differences in how these topics are presented.

The literature on women in comedy, particularly standup, is in its infancy. As such, the opportunities it affords for serious analysis are virtually endless. We can learn much from studying a small contingent of talented, creative women who have courageously defied cultural convention and left their mark in the male ordered world of standup comedy.

GLOSSARY

Act - synonym for routine; comic's material and delivery.

Amateur comic - beginner to standup comedy who is not paid for his/her performances.

Bit - a part of a routine revolving around a specific theme.

Bomb - a completely failed performance, receiving few or no laughs.

Comeback - line comic uses to put hecklers in their place, usually a quick, witty, sarcastic remark. Can also refer to joke comic uses to regain audience attention.

Delivery - how a routine is performed, involves gestures, speed variations, speech and timing.

Died - how a comic describes a performance which failed miserably.

Dives/Toilets - seedy bars characterized by excessive drunkenness where patrons are likely to give comics a hard time.

Genre - type of standup performance, i.e. straight monologue, using props, comical magic act, comical musical act etc.

Gig - a job performing comedy (either one-nighter or weekend).

Heckler - audience member who disturbs performance by calling out remarks (usually, but not always, insulting).

Hook - unique trademark or gimmick which sets comic apart from others, making him/her immediately recognizable.

Improvisation - spontaneous skits which are created on the basis of audience suggestion (usually done in teams).

Killed - how a comic describes his/her extremely successful performance in which audience laughed uproariously.

On the road - performing in other towns and cities.

Pro - a more experienced, professional standup comic who is paid for his/her performances.

Punchline - the actual joke itself.

Routine - a comic's script or act, includes actual written material and the delivery.

Segue - a sentence which bridges two different bits or topics, the link which forms routine into coherent whole.

Set - synonym for performance.

Setup - part of the bit which provides the premise (sets the stage for) the punchline.

Sight gag - outlandish visual humour using costume and props.

Slamming - ruthlessly and effectively putting down hecklers.

Stage persona - personality or image comic presents on stage.

Standup comedy - comic monologue, usually delivered solo.

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