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TAKE MY THESIS . . . PLEASE!  
THE ART OF STAND-UP COMEDY

By

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Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1997

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

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This thesis, submitted by Kyle J. Dukart in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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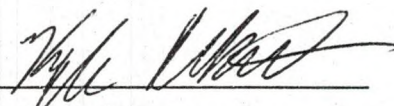
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## ABSTRACT

In my thesis, I explore the artistry of stand-up comedy primarily by concentrating on five aspects of the genre that one generally uses to discuss literature: theme, persona, language, narrative structure, and audience. My purpose is to critically analyze a mode of artistic expression that is rarely given serious academic consideration

To accomplish this purpose I researched various theories of comedy and then proceeded to listen to and read about dozens of stand-up comedians. Using my own and other's knowledge of comedy and literature, I then closely analyze parts of routines from ten of the comedians I studied, including Lenny Bruce, Jerry Seinfeld, Woody Allen, Richard Pryor, Steven Wright, George Carlin, Mark Twain, Lily Tomlin, Paula Poundstone, and Chris Rock, focussing on certain aspects of their performances to create my discussion of theme, persona, language, narrative structure, and audience within stand-up comedy.

From these explorations, I am able to demonstrate how a stand-up comedian creates his art by offering himself as a guide to the hidden aspects of our lives. He presents alternative visions of reality, giving each member of the audience the chance to reexamine his or her perspective and relieve tension through laughter.

## CHAPTER I

### GOOD EVENING, LADIES AND GERMS: AN INTRODUCTION

I have decided not to pursue stand-up comedy as a career. I made this life decision one fateful night while Karaokeing "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go" by 80's pop group *Wham!* Having been long ago resigned to the fact that I have no future in music, I decided to replace much of my off-key wailing with a few spontaneous stand-up type jokes that would hopefully draw from the momentum created by the comic who had just left the stage to an enthusiastic response from the crowd. When I arrived back at my seat from my turn in the spotlight, my wife politely commented, "You were better when you sang." That was the exact moment I decided not to pursue stand-up comedy as a career. I have had some success making people laugh on paper and at social gatherings and even as a composition teacher, but the stage, where your success is almost entirely gauged by the amount of laughter you generate, is another level beyond what most of us amateur comics can manage. It is not that good material for a stand-up act is unavailable, as most people can recognize the humor found in the absurdities and incongruities of life. Rather, it is the artistry required that limits the average person from succeeding or even attempting stand-up comedy.



Woody Allen said in an interview with Larry Wilde, "It isn't the jokes that do it, and the comedian has nothing to do with the jokes. It's the individual himself...You can take the worst material in the world and give it to W. C. Fields or Groucho Marx and there's just something that will come out funny" (Wilde 74). Stand-up comedy is an art performed by artists. It may often be an art performed in front of tipsy patrons simply looking for a good time but nevertheless it is an art. Much like any art, it is controlled and structured emotion or reason used to produce a reaction from others. Leo Tolstoy said that "the evolution of feeling proceeds by means of art—feelings less kind and less necessary for the well-being of mankind being replaced by others kinder and more needful for that end" (437). What is stand-up comedy if not a challenge to our feelings and our senses? It confronts, head-on, our sense of what is natural, right, and correct, and if it is good comedy it will force us to reevaluate how we feel while we laugh. It is similar to the experience we have when, in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck decides between good and evil, heaven and hell, turning Jim in or setting him free, and finally, going against society's teachings and deciding to set a runaway slave free, proclaims, "All right, then, I'll go to hell" (235). Whether or not one laughs at that moment in *Huck Finn*, the effect is parallel with what a good stand-up comedian does on stage and completely different from what I accomplished doing stand-up karaoke.

This thesis will explore the art of stand-up comedy using the methods one uses to explore literature, particularly comic narrative fiction. Although most people would agree that great literature can attain the label of great art, few, perhaps, would be interested in bestowing that label on any stand-up comedy performance. This thesis will explore the possibility that the label "art" does indeed belong in the same sentence as the term, "stand-up comedy." Although the various aspects of stand-up comedy will become clear as the thesis reaches its conclusion, this first chapter will provide at least a working definition. The subsequent chapters will apply different methods of discussing literature to an analysis of stand-up comedy, in particular persona, theme, language, narrative structure, and audience, while analyzing the recorded and written material of America's best and most influential stand-up comedians.

There is no comprehensive recorded history of stand-up comedy although a few authors have offered a recent history of the genre. Couple these modern histories with the various histories of vaudeville and the lecture circuit and one can get a basic idea of how stand-up comedy has progressed. Stand-up Comedy could probably be legitimately traced back to the beginning of time; Betsy Borns suggests that, "Before man learned to walk erect, there was comedy; after he learned, there was stand-up" (30). I will give a briefer account, concentrating on its history in the United States over the past 150 years.

It is hard to pinpoint the evolution of stand-up, but I can suggest some of the crucial influences on the genre. Circuses and other traveling tent shows that steadily gained popularity throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century had stand-up comedians as a central part of their show in the form of clowns and masters of ceremony. Another form of traveling entertainment was the lecture circuit that often featured some great comic talents such as Mark Twain and Artemus Ward. As I will demonstrate in chapter V, Twain's brand of humorous monologue is not that far removed from today's stand-up comedy. The biggest influence, though, and probably the beginning of true stand-up comedy, was the rise of vaudeville in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A good portion of those travelling the vaudeville circuit relied primarily on stand-up comedy and virtually all the performers used a stand-up type humor somewhere in their act. After the popularity of vaudeville started to wane, many vaudevillians made the move into the motion pictures, radio programs, and television shows that were replacing the vaudeville circuit. In fact, many of the stand-up comedians one associates with the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century had their start in vaudeville, including Jack Benny, George Burns, and Milton Berle, as did another great influence on American comedy, W. C. Fields. After the decline of vaudeville in the 1930s, stand-up comedy continued in its stage form throughout the 1940s and 1950s, with comics finding work in various nightclubs and resorts, such as the Catskills. With the opening of the New York Improv in 1963, stand-up comedy started to

take its modern form as the main attraction instead of simply being a part of a greater variety show. At the Improv, comedians didn't get paid but worked on their material, hoping to get discovered. Many did, including Freddie Prinze, Jimmy Walker, Bill Cosby, and Robert Klein. Other showcase clubs similar to the New York Improv started opening in other cities and stand-up comedy on the stage started to grow in popularity. The growth reached a frenzied pace in the 1980s as clubs dedicated to stand-up comedy went from 10 at the beginning of the decade to an estimated 250 to 300 paying clubs by 1987 (Borns 40). Its popularity has dropped a bit in the 1990s but it is still very strong, helped by cable television stations such as HBO, Showtime, and Comedy Central, which bring recorded stand-up performances to the home. Today, it is a central part of American entertainment and cultural life, extending its influence into television, film, literature, theatre, and everyday conversation.

Ralph Waldo Emerson defined comedy as follows:

The essence of all jokes, of all comedy, seems to be halfness; a non-performance of what is pretended to be performed, at the same time that one is giving loud pledges of performance. The baulking of the intellect, the frustrated expectation, the break of continuity in the intellect, is what we call comedy; and it announces itself physically in the pleasant spasm we call Laughter. (248)

According to Emerson, the activity of all animals except humans is filled with "unerring good sense" (248). Humanity, on the other hand, due to its so-called gift of reason, is very susceptible to corrupting any natural good sense it has, which sometimes results in comedy. Our activities are not marked by a wholeness or perfection with creation or nature, but rather a "halfness" that allows us to be included in all nature while simultaneously being able to see and analyze our activities as separate parts. When an action seen as a part of the whole does not jibe with what is natural, does not have unerring good sense, we recognize it and find it humorous. Woody Allen says in his routine, "My wife was an immature woman. I'd be in the bathroom taking a bath and she would walk right in and sink my boats" and we recognize Emerson's baulking of the intellect, frustrated expectation, and break of continuity (Wilde 16). Under the disguise of this natural complaint is the unnatural, the part that keeps us from attaining wholeness with nature.

Emerson's definition of comedy reminds us that we are an exceptional animal capable of seeing nature as separate parts distinct from one another while Nathan Scott's definition reminds us that we are still just animals:

The point that comedy is always making [is] that we are not pure, disembodied essences, that indeed we are not pure anything-at-all, but that we are men and that our health and happiness are contingent upon our facing into the fact that we are finite and

conditioned and therefore subject to all sorts of absurdities and interruptions and inconveniences and embarrassments--and weaknesses. (95)

The definitions are basically the same. It comes down to the struggle between reason and nature. Ideally, reason leads us into our natural role but often nature and reason diverge in two different directions and when the comedian points out the error that reason has so smugly presented as natural, we are reminded of our human limitations and we laugh.

Henri Bergson offers another way to envision this same idea. He writes in his essay, *Laughter*: "The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" (79). Comedy and its offspring, laughter, result from "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (84). Bergson's essay presents the same basic idea as Emerson and Scott. Humanity has been blessed with the tools of logic, mechanization, and reason, but these tools are often imperfectly or unnaturally applied. A misplaced logic may be applied to the right situation, as with the Dick Gregory joke that follows, or the right logic may be used in a misplaced situation, as with the Woody Allen joke from above. Either way, the result is comedy.

Gregory jokes in his routine, "Segregation is not all bad. Have you ever heard of a wreck where the people in the back of the bus got hurt?" (Wilde 250).

Segregation was the "reasonable" response of the white race to existence of the black race in the South and Gregory points out the ironic natural advantage to the black race despite the reason-based advantage the whites thought they were creating. The mechanism of segregation fails in this instance. The joke is a classic example of making the best out of a bad situation, but it is more than that. As with all comedy, it challenges human reason by making it look inferior to what one conceives as natural. Gregory presents his audience with the idea that it is natural to want to sit in the back of the bus because it is safer, so being forced to sit back there is actually an advantage rather than another disadvantage of being Black in the South. The joke reveals reason's error for all to see, ultimately questioning the superiority that the reasoner, in this case the white Southerner, presumes he holds over nature. At its best, comedy generates a mode of seeing imperfections that allows for their reform. Dick Gregory is calling for reform when he jokes about segregation. By exposing the faulty logic of one aspect of segregation, he opens up the whole system for examination. His method of reform ultimately delegitimizes unequal segregation by undermining the parts that hold it together, while reminding his listeners that these parts were thought up by a humanity, "subject to all sorts of absurdities and interruptions and inconveniences and embarrassments--and weaknesses" (Scott 95).

Of course, comedy doesn't always call for reform. Sometimes it simply calls for acceptance of our human quirks. When Robin Williams or Rich Little

does an imitation of a famous personality, the audience is confronted head-on with that person's quirks of facial movement, pitch-change, and choice of words caricatured so we will undoubtedly notice each detail and then laugh at all of them. An impression is not concerned with morality, however; it doesn't become more funny if we disapprove of the victim. A comedian doing John Wayne can elicit as many laughs as a comedian doing Hitler. The audience recognizes the caricature and revels in being reminded that the target is easily reduced from the perceived complicated level of human expression to a fairly simple mechanical pattern. This is, of course, a form of mockery, but it also is a reminder that no person, no matter who he or she is, can escape the confines of our mortal humanity. Those laughing in the audience accept this notion, at least momentarily, as do those of the mimicked who are able to find humor in their own exaggerated speech and movement patterns.

In another manner, when Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn crash their own funeral in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, it is humorous because one recognizes and accepts the mischievousness associated with adolescent children. After all, practically everyone has their own moments of shirking the often fallible rules and laws of society for a few moments of independent corruption and incivility. This type of instance is, once again, reason and nature coming into conflict. Those with a sense of humor accept the paradox that manners, rules, and laws



are there for their own good and should be followed while realizing it is only natural that they sometimes be ignored.

On occasion, comedy, especially stand-up comedy, deconstructs language. When Steven Wright says, "I put instant coffee in my microwave oven. I almost went back in time," we are hearing him manipulate reason and words for our amusement (Stone 66). He has applied logic that assumes adding one time-saving device to another time-saving device will save enough time to catapult him into the past. Naturally, this wouldn't make someone go back in time, but in some logically deformed manner it seems like it just might. In some ways the logic is completely reasonable, but it remains ridiculous. Wright has managed to manipulate language and meaning, once again causing a rift between the natural and the reasonable.

Comedians often take advantage of our reliance on language, illustrating the ambiguousness of what it signifies. Stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce did it with spirited abandon. The following is an excerpt from one of his acts, compiled and edited by John Cohen. Although the experience doesn't translate well to paper, the idea does:

Are there any niggers here tonight? I know that one nigger who works here, I see him back there. Oh, there's two niggers, customers, and, ah, *aha!* Between those two niggers sits one kike—man, thank God for the kike! Uh, two kikes. That's two kikes, and

three niggers, and one spic. One spic—two, three spics. One mick. One mick, one spic, one hick, thick, funky, spunky boogey. And there's another kike. Three kikes. Three kikes, one guinea, one greaseball. Three greaseballs, two guineas. Two guineas, one hunky funky lace-curtain Irish mick. That mick spic hunky funky boogey. (11)

What's the reason for this tirade of racial slurs? Bruce explains after he finishes slinging the jumbled but organized mess, "The point? That the word's suppression gives it the power, the violence, the viciousness" (Cohen 11). Whether or not one agrees with Lenny Bruce, he at least makes his audience question how language, in this case racial slurs, works. Bruce provides the opportunity to reevaluate the negative value associated with these words. He reminds us that they are just words that derive their power from context, attitude, and behavior rather than phonemes.

However one analytically breaks down a joke or a bit, there should be no dispute that good comedy creates awareness through unmasking. It reveals the truth without dressing it up, sometimes literally: "Even as a young comic filling in between strippers in 'toilets,' [Bruce] was outrageous—sometimes shlepping, Groucho-style, naked across the stage" (Keough 173). Good stand-up comedians battle our collective reason, revealing our language, our humanity, and our stupidity, while we all laugh together. Anthropologist Edward Hall notes that

"culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough, what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants. Years of study have convinced me that the real job is not to understand foreign culture, but to understand our own" (qtd. in Koziski 57). Stephanie Koziski intelligently notices, in "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic," that much like anthropology, stand-up comedy works to reveal what a culture hides. She writes, "Documenting areas of tacit knowledge and bringing them to the conscious awareness of their particular audiences are important functions performed by the anthropologist and the standup comedian in their respective roles" (57).

Perhaps this enlightenment is the function of all comedy but, like Koziski, I believe it is of special relevance to stand-up comedy. It is the stand-up comedian whom we specifically go to listen to and he<sup>1</sup> alone has our full attention. In order to be entertained, we must be willing to participate in his point of view and flow with wherever he chooses to take us. Unlike most comic literature or drama, which also uses language, the successful stand-up comedian is a solitary figure whose sole purpose is to create laughter, to speak the unspoken, to reveal the hidden, to conflict nature and reason. We, the audience,

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the fact that stand-up comedians have traditionally been male and are still about 80% male today, I will use masculine pronouns throughout the essay to refer to the non-specific comedian.

are carried along with his monologue, relinquishing control over what will be bared to our conscious mind. We must be readily willing to allow him to lead our minds into unexplored regions of analysis or he will not be successful. Using Albert Goldman's term, he becomes the "shaman" divulging the eternal and hidden struggle between reason and nature evident in every facet of life: "And then—when the [stand-up] performance is over and the 'unspeakable' has been shouted forth—there is mingled with the thunderous applause a sigh of release. Purged of their demons by the shaman, the tribe has been freed, for the moment, to 'hunt the prey and in general fight reality'" (Goldman 200).

The discovery of the conflicts between reason and nature presented by the stand-up comic hopefully results in laughter. Laughter is usually the goal of comic performance and is definitely the goal of stand-up comedy, differing from comic literature and other comedy aimed at a solo audience where laughter is certainly welcome but not necessary. Henri Bergson writes, "You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. ... Our laughter is always the laughter of a group" (64). Indeed, laughter is a group activity—a community building ritual that links the members of the audience and the comic together in a bond of understanding, of enlightenment. "Ha Ha. I got it. Did you get it? Of course you did, you're laughing." Laughter is also a function of the performer's immediate presence. The comic feeds off the laughter, learning which jokes to tell and how to tell

them. The laughter also works to alleviate the real sense of loneliness the solo comic feels while bearing the sole responsibility of entertaining the audience. Without laughter he sees himself and is seen as a lonely outsider struggling to be accepted into the audience, but if he is creating laughter, the stand-up comedian is in control of that same audience.

Required to produce laughter or suffer failure, the stand-up comedian on stage is in a unique position. The perspective is one of isolation and loneliness as well as aggression and contention. Being the only person on stage creates a lot of pressure for the performer. In a drama production, an actor can make a mistake and another actor may cover for him and the play will move on with the mistake forgotten. A dancer can miss a step and the audience may never know. A painter starts a new canvas. A director reshoots the scene. But if a stand-up comedian tells the wrong type of joke for the crowd or doesn't start out strong enough, he may very well be doomed for failure the rest of the night. Furthermore, the stand-up comedian, partly due to the alcohol consumption prevalent at clubs as well as the little respect he is given as an artist, is subject to hecklers looking to upstage him.

Every audience has its share of hecklers, drunks, melancholics, and nasties; and a few lame jokes can set them off in a feeding frenzy aimed at a comic's jugular. A comic, too, can "bomb," can "die." The stand-up comic is the most vulnerable artist in the business

because he needs laughs. "A clown is a warrior who fights gloom," says comic Red Skelton, "[and] when deafening silence greets his gestures, he stands there and bleeds." (Keough 171)

Polite applause is awarded the bad play or the clumsy dancer. Stand-up comedians risk being booed or simply ignored. They are constantly aware of how an audience is receiving them since their success hinges critically on the amount of laughter they are creating. In a way, the audience is a room full of critics writing their reviews while the comedian performs. His only defense against his solitary existence is the momentary relief that laughter brings. Woody Allen says about performing:

The pressure. It's very hard to constantly have to go before the public and get laughs. You have to appear on television and in clubs all over the country and constantly get laughs. A singer goes out, sings some songs, gets the applause and that's it ... a comedian has to consistently get laughs. If they are not roaring, you're in trouble. You have to be great all the time ... (Wilde 29)

There is no one else to relieve the burden; there is no bit that never fails. There is only the comic, his mike, and a bunch of drunks who forked over \$15 for their ticket and \$5 for their drink. They expect laughs and the comedian better deliver. No other artist is challenged to succeed at this type of lonely confrontation.

Maybe the comic deserves this pressure. Stand-up comedy is in many ways a very hostile act. Comedian Joe Bolster's experience shows how violent it can get:

Once I was working in San Antonio and I made a woman laugh so hard she started hyperventilating. She was kind of panting, so I thought she was kidding. She was right in front, and I started making faces right in her face...and she's gasping, but I still thought she was joking. Finally her boyfriend said, "My God, stop! You've got to stop! You're killing her!" ... It was the ultimate in comedy—literally "killing ... You see the power you can have—I actually created a medical difficulty because of my jokes. (qtd. in Borns 148).

Of course stand-up comedy isn't usually this violent, but the experience illustrates the power and control that the comedian can have over his audience. William Keough writes, "The mechanics of stand-up are as confrontational and rigid as those of boxing. A comic enters, takes the mike, and tries to 'destroy' his audience with some feints, a few well-placed jabs, a haymaker or two" (171). Making someone laugh is a method of mind and body control. A comedian taps into his victim's mind, forcing it to confront a truth or reconsider a dramatized situation that results in a series of spastic convulsions. The audience is at the

mercy of the performer, clearly addicted to the aphrodisiac hypnotically provided, but lacking any control over its distribution.

Besides mind and body control, stand-up comedy, like other comedy, is aggressive in another manner. Jay Sankey writes in his stand-up how-to book, *Zen and the Art of Stand-Up Comedy*, "I've often thought that, if there's no corpse, there's usually no joke. If in the joke there isn't some individual, group, idea, presumption, or convention being challenged (if not butchered outright), the chances are very good it's not much of a joke. Every joke needs to have a butt" (29). There is a victim for every joke and often the victim is sitting right under the comedian's nose sipping a Tom Collins. The joke, such as a simple pun, may not seem aggressive but it invariably is. The target may only be language, an animal, an inanimate object, or the comedian himself, but it is still an attack that also implicates how we think about these things. Henri Bergson writes:

the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*.  
 ... Several have defined man as 'an animal which laughs.' They might equally well have defined him as an animal which is laughed at; for if any other animal, or some lifeless object, produces the same effect, it is always because of some resemblance to man, of the stamp he gives it or the use he puts it to. (62)

When Rodney Dangerfield says, "No respect, I get no respect," and then proceeds to tell us about a time he got no respect, on the surface we appear to be



laughing at him and his weakness alone, but the source of laughter is actually his socially unacceptable characterization that we recognize in much of our fellow humanity and possibly ourselves.

Whoever or whatever the butt is, the act of joke-telling cannot be passive; it must attack and it must attack some facet of human existence. Couple this with the loneliness and isolation that is almost always a part of the act of joke-telling and the comedian is taking a risk that will do one of two things: He will either succeed by effectively attacking someone or something, and producing the involuntary muscle movement of his listeners, or he will fail and be painfully reminded of his solitary and futile existence. He will kill or be killed. In this manner, comedy, especially stand-up comedy, mirrors and imitates life. On stage, the stand-up comic is struggling to survive by getting laughs just as he is struggling to make a living. This is perhaps why many of us become embarrassed and sympathetic for the struggling comic despite the aggressiveness of his art. Like all humans, he is simply warding off his eventual death. The laughter will eventually stop. If he is good, it might last throughout his twenty minute, one hour, or two hour show, but it will end. Judy Carter writes in *Stand-up Comedy: The Book*, "Leave them wanting more. ... if you get a laugh near the end of your act, say 'Thank you, good night,' and get the hell out of there" (114). A big laugh at the end of the act followed by an enthusiastic applause may prolong the sense of success and immortality, but the stand-up

comedian, along with the laughter he produced, will eventually cease to exist. Death is inevitable for the comedian. It is possible that an audience member may later recall a punchline and start chuckling but ultimately, laughter, the source of the comic's existence, can't go on forever.

The stand-up comedian's pre-determined death—at the end of his set if he's good—is the largest barrier to his artistry. Art can't live for twenty minutes and then expire; it must live on. A stand-up comic's primary aim is to create laughter, which can't live on past the minutes he is on stage. If, as Leo Tolstoy and others say, art has to better the welfare of mankind, stand-up comedy and its short-lived manufacturing of laughter does not seem to fit. And in fact the skillful creation of laughter is not what makes stand-up comedy an art. The artistry, regardless of the cliché, comes partly from the previously mentioned imitation of life. Stand-up comedy is a struggle that mirrors our struggle for survival in which we are at times aggressive and at times alone, sometimes both. By means of this imitation, it offers an alternative way to view our society. That is why it is an art, but that does not ensure its quality. Good stand-up comedy doesn't simply create laughter with good jokes. If that were the case, I could purchase a simple joke book and be successful on a stage. Stand-up comedy utilizes much more than jokes, gags, and bits; and just as in the attempt to define comedy, there are many possible approaches one could take to discuss its artistry beyond its jokes. My method so far has been to define it in terms of all comedy

as well as separate it from other forms of comedy. From here on I turn to literature and its abundant theories to help me further discuss stand-up comedy as an art. I will look at specific stand-up comics while discussing their work in terms of five methods that theorists use to discuss literature: the communication of a theme in a stand-up act, the creation of a persona to communicate the theme, the playful but careful use of language, the development of a narrative structure within some of the most interesting acts, and the important and constant consideration of and relationship with the audience. This essay's purpose is to explore a new and interesting way to discuss stand-up comedy but not to fully discuss all the aspects of it. For instance, stand-up comedy is a performance art and I do not give much attention to the movement, tone, inflection, costume, etc. of the performer. My purpose is to address the literary qualities of stand-up comedy. Unfortunately, this narrowing of focus along with the necessity to translate performed comedy to words will unfortunately detract from the humor and message of the comedy.

## CHAPTER II

### A PRIEST, A RABBI, AND A MINISTER: THEME AND STAND-UP COMEDY

Like good literature, good stand-up comedy does more than simply provide its audience with one or more direct narratives to follow. Stand-up comedy needs a series of setups followed by punchlines to be interesting, just as literature probably needs plots, but these are only the structures that keep the two arts progressing. Beyond these structures is theme, which is essential in all art with stand-up comedy being no exception. The greatest stand-up acts are built around decipherable themes that appear sincere. In order to gain the all-important trust of the audience, comics need to enter into a conversation with us that appears truthful and somewhat intimate. This conversation centers around the personality and beliefs of the performer, around themes that he takes seriously and is interested in. Deciphering the themes is up to the audience, just as it is up to the reader of literature. These more or less coherent themes are what allow the comic to live on past his short explosion on stage. The themes along with the persona are what we remember, what stay with us. To explore the importance of theme to stand-up comedy, I will look at the acts of the revolutionary Lenny Bruce and the mega-popular Jerry Seinfeld.

Before the discussion of theme goes any further, I believe it is important to differentiate between theme and persona, which is discussed in the next chapter. This separation is necessary, because theme and persona are so interrelated in stand-up comedy. Literature, as well as film and theater, usually has the luxury of several different personae, that are easily distinguished from each other, through which to present its themes. The solo art of stand-up comedy generally relies on one persona and when the performer creates more than one persona he must create it through the persona he initially brings on stage. Therefore, any theme he communicates must, in some way, come through his primary persona. Due to this close relationship a few key differences between persona and theme should be kept in mind. Theme is discovered gradually in a performance while persona is almost immediately disclosed. There are almost always numerous themes but, as mentioned, there is usually only one persona. Theme is often ambiguous, while persona is more useful if it is straightforward. Theme is directly connected with the author's intentions and world-view while persona is a tool for communicating that theme. This last distinction is often the hardest to see with some comics as they may appear simply didactic or cruelly straightforward. Good comedy, however, manages never to appear overtly superior to what it is commenting on. A good comic may point out a comic incongruity and be granted a hardy laugh, but it is always funnier if the comic's persona is somehow implicating itself and even better yet when it appears as if

the comedian himself is guilty of the comic indiscretion. The persona allows for the personal implication while the theme allows for the message of the humor. For example, a slapstick comic who appears, by way of dress and manner, to be a ballerina, but repeatedly falls down, has the persona of a clumsy oaf while her theme seems to point to Nathan Scott's view that humanity, despite how it thinks of itself, is "subject to all sorts of absurdities and interruptions and inconveniences and embarrassments--and weaknesses" (95). The comedian is implicating her persona directly while communicating a more universal message about humanity. If this same comedian, while doing her ballerina bit, accidentally ripped her pants, she would no longer be implicating her persona but herself and the laughter of the audience would undoubtedly increase. Unfortunately, stand-up comedians can't control accidents, so they must rely on the effective use of theme and persona to create a well-crafted stand-up performance.

Lenny Bruce is the most interesting stand-up comedian to analyze in terms of theme, because his persona and thematic message can sometimes be very difficult to differentiate. At times in his act, he appears didactic and in between his trials for obscenity late in his career and his death in 1966, he sometimes sounded a bit preachy. But at his best, Lenny Bruce was a brilliant stand-up comic who was unarguably concerned about the message he was sending with his stand-up routine. "[Bruce] wanted his audience to think—

*insisted* on it—as he shpritzed about such things as ‘The Bomb,’ ‘Religions, Inc.’ and ‘How to Entertain a Colored Guy at Home’” (Keough 178). Bruce aimed high. His themes probed the problems facing our culture during the 1960s as well as institutions near and dear to America’s heart. His favorite targets included censorship, violence, race relations, drugs, religion, conservatism, liberalism, and the cold war. According to Frank Kofsky, “... what he sought to do ... was to subject all of society’s conventional beliefs to the merciless glare of rational thought” (24). Bruce wanted his listeners to confront and contemplate the smug authority influencing much of what they thought and did. In his essay “Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation,” Lawrence Mintz says the following about comedy as social commentary, which can be nicely applied to Bruce:

It might be said, then, that the trickster, con-man, and likable rogue all turn dishonesty, selfishness, disruptive and aggressive behavior, and licentiousness [the last two are typical of Bruce] into virtues, or at least into activity that the audience can applaud, laugh with, and celebrate. The pleasure the audience derives from this sanctioned deviance may be related to the ritual violation of taboos, inversion of ritual, and public iconoclasm frequently encountered in cultural traditions. (77)

Mintz goes on to write that one can express the stand-up event in the form of a dialectic where "a thesis—basic human traits and characteristics—is confronted with an antithesis—polite manners and social restraints—with a synthesis perhaps being tolerance or at least a relaxation of hostility and anxiety" (77). Above all Lenny Bruce called for acceptance and equality for all in the face of an established authority that saw itself as superior. His persona was that of a true picaresque rogue hero such as Huck Finn, J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield, or Saul Bellow's *Augie March*, trying to deal with a society that he can't fully understand and that he can't fully fit into. Many stand-up comics conform to this description but none more than Lenny Bruce, who was constantly searching for and revealing the phonies and the phoniness of his society and in his own life. His persona is also remarkably similar to that of Alexander Portnoy in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, a novel written after Bruce's death. Sheldon Grebstien writes in "The Comic Anatomy of *Portnoy's Complaint*:"

No voice quite like Portnoy's had ever spoken to us from the pages of an American book. What is immediately evoked for most readers is the "live" performance of stage and nightclub, the attractive-repulsive, brilliant-neurotic, awful-hilarious, aggressive-self-destructive Jewish stand-up comedian, perhaps epitomized in Lenny Bruce, who also exploited sexuality, obscenity, the burden of



being Jewish, and the display of his tortured ego for painful laughs.

(153)

Bruce's persona played a significant role in the development of the American comic hero. He was instrumental in bringing this important comic character to the stand-up stage where, like his literary counterparts, he would work to position his persona outside the culture he belonged to and then proceed to comment on the corruption present within that same culture. But in a thematic sense he was just as entrenched in, and often a full participant in, what he berated on stage.

Lenny Bruce was never afraid to use any taboo words and that got him arrested a few times in the early to mid sixties. He told Steve Allen in an interview,

I don't make any bones about the fact that sometimes I'm irreverent and sometimes I allow myself—this is a rationalization—the same poetic license as Tennessee Williams, or Shakespeare. In other words, I'll never use four-letter words for *shock* value, for a laugh; but if it *fits* the character, then I want to swing with it and say it.

(qtd. in Kofsky 27)

Bruce's words always had a purpose and a message. The following is taken from a Bruce performance:

If this society was the least little bit correct, if religion helped it out a little bit, and that act [sex] was the least bit the antithesis of what is perverse, and you felt that it was a true Christian act of procreation, if it was sweet hugging and kissing—watch. The fellow comes off the plane: BRITISH VOICE: “Is that the fellow who fucked Mother? Oh, yes! How *are* you! *Damn*, I haven’t seen you in *so* long, and you’re such a *wonderful* person. You certainly made Mother feel *good*. I certainly would like to *thank* you—that certainly was a nice thing to do. And I understand you gave her some candy besides.” But we don’t agree that it’s a nice act. It’s a filthy, dirty act. ... In fact, when you *really* hate them, what’s the vernacular we use? “*Screw you, mister!*” If you were taught it was a sweet Christian act of procreation, it was the nicest thing we can do for each other, you’d use the term correctly and say, “*Unscrew you, mister.*” But the best people in the tribe don’t do it. (Cohen 174-75).

Bruce felt compelled to comment on the repression of sexuality in our society. His repeated use of “obscene” sexual words and sexual imagery helped in creating that theme. If he appeared a bit didactic and too straightforward, it is because he often felt he had to combine his thematic intentions with his persona so the audience would think above and beyond the words and the subject he

chose. Making his themes clear through the use of his persona was, he felt (and he was probably correct in this assumption), necessary in the early sixties when he was at his peak. Despite Bruce's explanation of what he was doing, the bit is a brilliant piece of stand-up comedy and social commentary.

Bruce was certainly commenting from outside the mainstream culture but, interestingly, this bit shows how he was still curiously inside it. On stage, Bruce's persona was able to reject the way our language negatively uses sex, but the audience knows that Bruce will probably not talk that way to his mother's sex partners or start saying "unscrew you" or even stop being careful about using profanity around his own child. Part of the tension one feels and much of the humor that provides relief derives from that contradiction. Bruce, as well as those listening to him, can understand and discuss the failures of society and culture, but acting on that understanding is not always so easy and the contradiction once again reveals the weaknesses of humanity.

In the following bit, the theme forms by reenacting an illogical but accurate conversation between men:

This conflict, you know, like you talk to the average guy:

"Isn't that a pretty chick?"

"Yeah, she's beautiful."

"What's her beauty – to you?"

"Well, ah, she's got a pretty face, nutty jugs..."

"Well, ah, would you marry a woman like that?"

"Of course."

"You'd like her for your wife?"

"Sure!"

"Would you let your *wife* dress that way?"

"No no no!"

"Why not?"

"Cause she got her jugs stickin out."

"But you don't want her to dress that way."

"No, no!"

So that's where the conflict is—we want for a wife a combination kindergarten teacher and a hooker. (Cohen 225)

Bruce's own wife, Honey Harlow, was a stripper and he is revealing his own feelings about her profession. Even though she continued to strip after they married, Bruce convinced her to try a few fully clothed gigs. Bruce can point out the failure of reason in a humorous manner, but he can't always escape the bind of that same failed reason, making the comedy and the humanity of his act more real and more powerful.

Bruce was revolutionary because he brought stand-up comedy from the era of simply telling predictable jokes to an era that forced the audience, both those who paid and those who complained, to examine their own conscience and

their world-view—to really think. Jerry Seinfeld said of Bruce, “The big thing Lenny did wasn’t to change the language but the style. He talked about the comedy of the life we’re all really leading. He was talking about how people really felt when they had sex, which is a tremendous jump from ‘My wife is so fat—’” (Borns 238). Bruce was all about theme. He wanted to say something and he found an outlet in stand-up comedy.

Jerry Seinfeld is also very concerned with theme. No one could ever accuse Seinfeld of dealing with the same level of issues and topics as Bruce, but that certainly doesn’t take away from his comedy. Seinfeld is concerned with the little things in life, focusing his audience on the day-to-day occurrences that would otherwise pass us by. His topics include phones, cab drivers, air travel, supermarkets, and clothing. All these topics are common fare for stand-up comedians, but Seinfeld has been tremendously successful concentrating almost solely on these types of subjects. He has even been able to recreate his persona and themes on a highly rated television program and in many ways, revolutionized the situation comedy by satirizing its traditional plot structure.

The following is what appears to be a spontaneous section from one of his routines that illustrates the type of themes he focuses his act on:

[A phone from the audience rings.] Oh, Let me get that, Let me get that. That’s for me I asked them to hold my phone. That is so embarrassing, isn’t it? ... Oh the phones, we have gone nuts with

the phones, haven't we? We're crazy with the phones. This guy thinks he needs that phone. The thing that amuses me most about the phone machine is how often we call people now trying to get the machine. That's what's happened now with the machine. If the person picks up you're, "Oh, uh, I, uh, oh I didn't, I didn't think you would be there. I uh, I just wanted to leave a message saying, 'Sorry I missed you.'" (Seinfeld)

Seinfeld has an incredible knack for picking and pointing out the various weaknesses and incongruities that remind us of our humanity. Seinfeld's act isolates human reason, analyzes it, and then holds it up for ridicule. This theme constantly reminds us that our nature—our common sense—knows better but our reason will fail us more than we realize. The greatness of his act lies in the overlaying of this theme on the entire performance. Despite all the idiosyncrasies he manages to remind us we have, there is not a feeling of human incompetence floating over the one hour show. Rather, his bits work simultaneously with the laughter they create to build a bond between himself and his listeners. Seinfeld truly builds a community by celebrating human weakness. He makes his listeners and himself sound like idiots and the bigger idiot you are, the further entrenched you are in that community. If you aren't a participant in or haven't witnessed these idiocies then you are an outsider and probably the actual idiot, incapable of noticing and accepting human weakness.

Seinfeld's theme reminds us that we are basically all the same simpletons dealing with all the same shit, but at least we are doing it together.

The last point about theme that I would like to make feeds off this comment from Jerry Seinfeld:

[Stand-up comedy is] pared down entertainment ... just because it's so elemental doesn't make it any less art. The fact that it is pared down is an artistic statement in itself. Someone said, the only concept that runs through all art, which is positive, is economy—something that's just good and everything else is gone. Stand-up is really one of the ultimate examples of that, because it's the most economical art—in a given space and time, you're getting more entertainment and impressions of life than with just about anything else. (Borns 284)

I think that Seinfeld hits on an important point about stand-up comedy that is often overlooked and possibly explains why it garners little respect in terms of art. A stand-up act will present many themes through many different narratives during the length of a routine. Hearing from so many directions makes the art appear too indiscriminating and almost aimless but that isn't necessarily the case. A good stand-up comic is saying something; he is just saying it economically and in a spontaneous manner. After all, comedy must surprise in some way, presenting its audience with the unexpected or the incongruous and

stand-up comics present their surprises through what appears to be a naturally spontaneous persona, imitative of real life personalities one interacts with everyday. Relating themes as if by random accident only adds to the art of stand-up comedy presenting economically a performance truly imitative of life. I'll work with this aspect of stand-up comedy's spontaneous structure more in chapter V. For now, one can see that theme is essential to a memorable and artistic stand-up routine. To be more than a flash on the stage that disappears as soon as he leaves, a stand-up comedian must develop and present intelligent themes that challenge the audience. Good comedians do this, as does good art.



### CHAPTER III

#### NO RESPECT, NO RESPECT: PERSONA AND STAND-UP COMEDY

Stand-up comedians are not unlike characters in a book. They all need to develop a personality in order to come alive—to talk and communicate with the audience. Readers, for the most part, separate the author of a fiction from the characters he or she creates, constructing a world unto itself where the author is of little consequence. This is not the case in stand-up comedy and in some narrative fiction where it is sometimes hard and undesirable to separate the author from the creative work. Mark Twain writes *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in such a language that his audience will be tempted to believe that an uneducated country boy is the author. Alexander Portnoy in Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* speaks to his analyst in such a manner that it is hard to believe that his eccentric life is only the creation of someone else's imagination. It becomes difficult to separate the narrative from its narrator and still accept it as real; so in these examples of narrative fiction, one simply imagines that the implied author is a real human instead of a creation of the real author. Due to the presence of a living, breathing individual, the audience does an opposite yet similar thing in stand-up comedy, imagining that the recounted events and thoughts are really

those of the human on stage instead of his artistic creation. A stand-up comedian's persona tries to make us forget that his act is a conceptualized plan to make us laugh. He tries to appear spontaneous and even becomes interactive with the audience to maintain this hoax. The persona he displays is his sole tool for communicating with the audience and therefore must be presented as realistically as the narrators in *Huck Finn* and *Portnoy's Complaint*.

Betsy Borns writes, "Every stand-up goes onstage as a character to some extent. Some may adopt a persona that's very similar to their own personality, but it's still a separate entity—a person telling jokes as opposed to telling the truth, which no 'real' person does" (91). In stand-up comedy, the audience wants to know whom they're dealing with right away and they want to like him. The stand-up comedian must be credible and he must be funny and much of his success seems to depend on audience members believing that the persona before them is the real thing, not some imaginary character being performed. In this respect, it is a little like film where actors such as John Wayne, Cary Grant, and Katherine Hepburn bring more to their lines and movements than just their acting skills; they bring personae created from their previous work. However, most stand-up comedians can't rely on the persona created from previous performances because they do not generally reach a mass audience. Instead, they rely on recognizable types such as the cheapskate, the loser, the idiot, the drunkard, the neurotic, and so on. A stand-up comedian may combine two or

more of these, but his persona will never be too complicated and developed, so that the audience can grasp it immediately. This instantaneous presentation of persona allows the audience to instantly identify with the comedian, who needs us on his side to be successful. As Jay Sankey writes to his aspiring stand-up comics, "There are many things to consider when it comes to your stage character, but without a doubt the two most important qualities you should strive to obtain are Likability and Vulnerability" (57). By creating a recognizable persona off the bat, a stand-up comedian can be likable and vulnerable. Good comedians quickly create a persona that the audience sees a little of itself in, although not too much, and that the audience believes is genuine. For example, a gorgeous woman can't create a persona whereby she is constantly rejected by men. Stand-up comedy's way of developing persona is distinct from methods most often used in literature, film, and theater because comics don't have to be as concerned about a complex development of the persona. The stand-up comic is alive and doesn't appear to be acting, so the audience accepts him as a developed and living character. But, no matter how the persona is developed in different arts, it serves the same function in all of them: to imitate portions of life that the audience can recognize, to create a context from which to reflect, and to communicate with the audience. Using the stand-up comedy of Woody Allen and Richard Pryor, I will illustrate this further.

Due to his success, both as a director and an actor, in many films throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, including *Annie Hall*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Regarding Henry*, there is probably not a more recognizable persona than that of Woody Allen. He has portrayed variations of the same persona in his stand-up act, his fiction, his drama, and most prominently, his films. Although we all probably have a clear picture of his persona, I will offer my own description. He is a loser, a schlemiel, who is weak and ineffectual but seems to come out okay. His 5 foot 6 inch stature, receding hairline, glasses, and lanky body projects his persona at first sight and his words back it up. He is also neurotic and always anxious about his ineffectual attempts at living a meaningful life. It often appears that his neurosis causes his weakness. Despite all this, he likes to talk about himself intimately and often comes across as arrogant and vain. In his biography of Woody Allen, Graham McCann writes, "Allen developed this illusion of intimacy, this appearance of an autobiography in the offing, this context of confession. Over the years he has made his public persona so 'real', so fascinating, that we shake our heads in disbelief when he insists that this 'Woody' is not him" (44). Allen's persona is certainly ingrained in the consciousness of many, but it all started to take shape in nightclubs where he had to create this persona in the opening moments of his act. His appearance helped considerably, but his stand-up comedy bits were what started to cement that persona into the minds of the audience.

The following is the opening of one of his acts in the mid-sixties:

Since I was here last, a lot of significant things have occurred in my private life that I thought we could go over tonight and evaluate. I moved, let me start right at the very beginning. I formerly lived in Manhattan, uptown east in a brownstone building, but I was constantly getting mugged and assaulted and sadistically beaten about the face and neck. So I moved into a door-manned apartment house on Park Avenue, that's rich and secure and expensive and great. And I lived there for two weeks and my doorman attacked me. (Allen, *The Nightclub*)

Allen wastes no time presenting his persona to the audience. He immediately lets them know that he will be talking about his life while his first joke confirms the audience's physical impression of Allen as a weakling—someone who is picked on and has little ability to defend himself. We can all identify to some extent with this feeling of weakness that Allen's persona is representative of. Allen himself has said, "I work on funny lines but what I'm really interested in is creating an image of a warm person that people will accept as funny, apart from the joke or the gag" (qtd. in Yacowar 13). He is accepted as a warm and funny person because he has turned his human suffering into a humor that we, his audience, can see as applicable to us and can identify with. Maurice Yacowar notes that, "... his persona is true to our sense of our own insecurities and

aspirations. We all have our anxieties; Allen expresses them for us. His remarkable gift to his audience is his candor in shamelessly exposing his dreads and his dreams—even though his weakness and failure are fictitious” (10). Allen plays out our worst dreams and fears to their fateful end, but giving it the edge of comedy and insanity. We can release our own tensions through our involvement with his life. The following is a bit with which he ended one of his acts:

I was down South once and I was invited to a costume party. ... And I figured what the hell, it's Halloween, I'll go as a ghost. I take a sheet off the bed and I throw it over my head. And I go to the party. You have to get the picture, I'm walking down the street in a deep southern town; I have a white sheet over my head and a car pulls up and three guys with white sheets say, "Get in." So I figure they're guys going to the party as ghosts. I get into the car and I see were not going to the party and I tell them and they say, "Well, we have to pick up the grand dragon." All of the sudden it hits me, down South, white sheets, the grand dragon, put two and two together, so I figure there's a guy going to the party dressed as a dragon. All of the sudden a big guy enters the car and I'm sitting there between four clansmen—four big-armed men and the doors locked and I'm petrified. I'm trying to pass desperately, I'm saying,

"you all" and "grits." I must have said "grits" fifty times. They ask me a question and I say, "Oh grits, grits." And next to me is the leader and you can tell he's the leader because he's the one wearing contour sheets. They drive me to an empty field and I gave myself away because they asked for donations and everybody there gave cash and when it came to me I said, "I pledge \$50." They knew immediately. They took my hood off and threw a rope around my neck and they decided to hang me. ... And I spoke to them, I was really eloquent. I said, "Fellows, this country can't survive unless we love one another regardless of race, creed, or color." And they were so moved by my words, not only did they cut me down and let me go, but that night I sold them \$2,000 worth of Israel bonds.

Good night. (Allen, *The Nightclub*)

Here Allen's persona confronts our fear of unwarranted hate in our lives through a fantastic story with an impossibly happy ending. The Allen persona has confronted the worst life can offer and we come away laughing and smiling. After all, if the dim-witted, obviously Jewish Allen persona can escape the Klan unscathed, then the rest of us should have little problem surviving the same dilemma. Of course, this is only the escape presented by Woody Allen through his persona. The fact remains that the Klan does exist and Allen is actually reminding us that we don't love each other regardless of race, creed, or color. He

is expressing a much more pessimistic view about life, pointing out that a fanciful ending to the situation is the only non-tragic means of escape from this chain of events. The audience gets a moment of escape from the fear of hate but also identifies with the anxiety of both Allen's persona and Allen himself toward that same hate.

The Woody Allen persona also carries over into his prose, providing an interesting comparison between stand-up comedy and fiction, especially in consideration of persona. Yacowar writes,

Although in his writing Allen cannot exploit the consistent effect of his face and voice, one can sense his persona behind the prose. Allen still projects the image of a short, paranoid loser, with sexual and intellectual pretensions, a man who exists on the fringe of an unsympathetic and absurd world, and who is both teased and satisfied by improbable dreams. (74).

The characters in most of his stories have traits similar to Allen on stage and in film. His three books, *Without Feathers*, *Getting Even*, and *Side Effects*, use his recognizable persona to express the same themes as his act, albeit in a more intellectual manner. In these works, as in his stand-up routines, he imagines the world he is familiar with in fantastic ways to elicit laughter and to express his various themes. Just like Allen's stories about the doorman who beats him up and the Klansmen who try to hang him, his prose takes recognizable situations



and thoughts and comically re-imagines them. The following is an excerpt from Allen's "If the Impressionists Had Been Dentists:"

Dear Theo,

Will life never treat me decently? I am wracked by despair! My head is pounding! Mrs. Sol Schwimmer is suing me because I made her bridge as I felt it and not to fit her ridiculous mouth! That's right! I can't work to order like a common tradesman! I decided her bridge should be enormous and billowing, with wild explosive teeth flaring up in every direction like fire! Now she is upset because it won't fit in her mouth! She is so bourgeois and stupid, I want to smash her! I tried forcing the false plate in but it sticks out like a star burst chandelier. Still, I find it beautiful. She claims she can't chew! What do I care whether she can chew or not!

*(Complete 107)*

This is most of the first letter that starts the series of letters addressed from Vincent to Theo that make up the short story. As comics often do on stage, Allen is doing an impression of a famous painter. Not blessed with the ability to alter his stage voice in order to do audible mimicry, Allen has used this comic method in his writing. In probably his most famous short story, "The Kugelmass Episode," which won an O. Henry Award in 1977, Allen creates a protagonist fed up with his boring life, his aging wife, and his ineffective analyst. To escape,

Kugelmass seeks the help of a magician who possesses a cabinet that can transport its inhabitant into any book. Kugelmass retreats into Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, where he is satisfied for a while but becomes distressed when he and the reader experience the adverse effects created by this close intermingling of reality and art. For example, Emma Bovary wants to return to Kugelmass's time and win an Oscar while literature students across the nation are wondering, "Who is this character on page 100? A bald Jew is kissing Madame Bovary?" (*The Complete* 352). As in his stand-up act, Allen has created a persona (Kugelmass) from whom the audience can reflect and somewhat identify, granting him the means to explore various themes. In this case Allen creates the opportunity to explore the effect of life on art and art on life through a fantastic and comic narrative. All of Woody Allen's creations are strongly linked by his ability to create a strong persona. His use of persona is the biggest reason for his success in stand-up, film, and literature.

Richard Pryor's success is also strongly linked to the persona he convincingly portrays on stage. In *Laughing in the Dark: A Decade of Subversive Comedy*, Laurie Stone writes of Pryor, "He evolves a comedy of wounds and nakedness, exposing social cons and his own deviousness, the persona sweet and wild, crazy like a fox and like a kid who has never been loved enough" (xviii). Pryor exposes society through his talent as a linguist and a mimic with his persona narrating and commenting on the characters he creates on stage. In the

first part of one of his acts he brilliantly mimics or personifies his car, his car's motor, a few different nondescript white and black people in various situations, the First Lady, three breeds of dogs, a monkey, his heart, and an angel—and this is only a partial list (Pryor). Pryor uses his talents to create this myriad of characters, through which he communicates his themes. Keough writes, "In his race material, Pryor got much mileage out of his considerable skills as a mimic, demonstrating—colorfully, sometimes cruelly—differences between whites and blacks talking, walking, eating, fucking. RACE, my, yes, he did talk about RACE—nigger, honkey, whatever" (187). Pryor certainly did bring the differences of race into the open in his act, relating a serious black perspective in a funny and entertaining way.

Pryor's persona invited us into a very personal life where we would share in not only laughter, but grief, anger, sadness, despair, and fear. His persona is alive with experience that is certainly fanciful but entrenched in a deeper reality. Pryor joked about his Grandmother who ran a whorehouse and his father who often beat him. The Pryor persona is effective because it seems so real and he often uses well-known pieces of his personal history, such as a recent heart attack or an arrest, to let the audience know that his act is genuine. The following excerpt from his act isn't as raw as others, but it still uses the emotion of Pryor's life and the persona created from it to produce a funny moment. It also illustrates Pryor's wonderful talent for making various characters come alive,

although Pryor's performance, more than that of many others, is severely limited in this transference to paper. The bit works off the story of his beloved monkeys and their unfortunate demise:

I came home and found my monkeys was dead ... I love my monkeys so much. I was in the backyard crying. There was a dog that used to live next door to us, a German Shepherd, right. Big, ugly, mean, German Shepherd. He would bite anything. And he jumped the fence and came over here. I felt something move in my hand like that and it was him and I started petting. And he looked at me and said, "What's the matter Rich?"

I said, "My Monkeys died."

"Say what? Your monkeys died? Ain't that a bitch? You mean the two monkeys that used to be in the trees, they died?"

"Yea, they died."

"Shit, I was gonna eat them too. Don't linger on that shit too long ya know. It'll fuck with ya."

"I'll try."

"Yea, you take care." He went back and jumped over the fence and just before he jumped he looked back at me and said, "Now you know I'm gonna be chasing you tomorrow." (Pryor)

The German Shepherd comes across as very sympathetic to Pryor's loss. It works because we believe that the loss of the monkeys was real for Pryor. His personification of the dog as an understanding, albeit tough, sympathizer, also seems to fit the personality one could transfer to a dog. It is fantastic but it is real at the same time. In his routines, Richard Pryor is constantly successful at creating a persona with depth and feeling, allowing for jokes that not only make us laugh but help us come to a better understanding of Pryor and the humanity he represents.

A realistic and empathetic persona is crucial to creating a successful relationship with the audience. Even more importantly, it provides the means to sustain that relationship after the performance is over, creating a memorable representation of who we all are that will remain with the comic's audience long after they go home. Seldom does one remember specific jokes after seeing a stand-up comedian. Instead, it is always the persona that lives on past the death of laughter, reminding us of the comedian's voice, body, movement, attitudes, themes, and language. Not including the ones I excerpted for this thesis, I cannot come very close to reproducing any of Richard Pryor's or Woody Allen's bits, but their persona will always remain fresh in my mind. It is persona that can immortalize a performance, giving it the quality necessary to be labeled as truly great.

## CHAPTER IV

### A MAN WALKS INTO A BAR. THE SECOND ONE DUCKS: LANGUAGE AND STAND-UP COMEDY

Good stand-up comedians are excellent investigators and crafters of language. They need to be, because revealing the intricacies and incongruity of meaning through a careful manipulation of words is what they essentially do. Language is not limited to the spoken word in this context, but extended to represent the method by which all living things communicate. Stand-up comedians critically analyze that communication and sometimes enlighten their audience with its hidden, true, or imaginative meanings. The simplest pun and the oldest joke deconstruct language in some way, making the listener aware of meaning and language for at least a few moments. For example, the children's joke, "Why did the chicken cross the road?—to get to the other side," concentrates its audience on meaning in an interesting way. The setup, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" signifies to its listeners, among other things, that they are about to hear a joke, so they prepare for the unexpected or the ludicrous that presumably will come in the punchline. But in this case the joke delivers a punchline that is completely realistic and ordinary and the opposite of

what the listeners expect. The joke has effectively made the listeners aware of what the setup usually means by illustrating that it doesn't necessarily have to signify what they expect it to. The listeners are forced into an unexpected awareness of what the setup signifies in a normal circumstance. This simple and old joke points out the foibles of the language and its inventor, humanity. Most jokes or bits don't make the audience analyze comedy itself, as this joke does, but rather focus in the direction of other events, objects, words, and behavior that are present in all of our lives. But the commonality of it all is that the listeners are asked to re-envision how they normally interpret and make meaning out of the events, objects, words, and behavior that are presented to them through language.

Stand-up comedians must also be able to effectively communicate the discoveries they have made about language and meaning. As I argued in the previous chapter, persona is very important for good communication with the audience, but the careful use of spoken and body language is also essential to stand-up comedy. The use or non-use of a single word can make or break a joke and the proper gesture can multiply the laughter. Larry Miller says about the writing of stand-up comedy, "I analyze down to commas—and I love it. Comics are like poets. No one would ever think to say to a poet, 'Gee, why did you have to add that extra syllable to a line?' That's what poetry is about—a thousand different considerations—balance, rhythm, texture. And so is comedy" (Borns

235). The choice of words is also important to the development of persona and the creation of characters within a stand-up routine. Many comedians develop a distinctive voice through their choice of language, and just as Mark Twain set his characters apart through his different written dialects, many stand-up comedians do impressions to create characters within the structure of their act. Close attention to the details of language is much of what separates the good comics from the mediocre ones. Looking at Steven Wright and George Carlin, I hope to demonstrate the importance of having a good command of the language used in one's culture as well as the language used within one's stand-up routine. Language is the comedian's business and he must be able to deconstruct and utilize it skillfully.

Steven Wright is a zany, imaginative comic who fiercely challenges the reality we take for granted in our everyday lives with Henny Youngman-like one-liners and short personal narratives. His depressed persona treats meaning as interchangeable and fuzzy and his language is precise. He is fascinated with time travel and mathematics and constantly applies the logic of one situation to that of another. Wright's world certainly has different rules but they are all simple mutations of what his audience deals with every day. In his world, Wright does abstract painting—no canvas, no paint, no brushes; he just thinks about it. He goes to a drive-in movie in a cab; it cost him \$95. He spilled spot remover on his dog and now the dog is gone. He used to be a narrator for bad



mimes. He has a friend who is a radio announcer; you can't hear him whenever he goes under a bridge. This is Wright's world. It is a world that lets us see our own in a different light, reminding us that the logic and reason we depend on is fragile and easily manipulated. His comedy makes humanity's complicated tool of language look like an imprecise machine, nicely reinforcing Henri Bergson's theory that comedy results from "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (84). Notice Wright's play with hierarchy in the following bit:

One time right in the middle of a job interview I took out a book and I started reading. The guy said, "What the hell are you doing?" I said, "Let me ask you one question. If you were in a vehicle and you were traveling at the speed of light and you turned your lights on, would they do anything?" He said, "I don't know." I said, "Forget it then, I don't want to work for you." (Wright)

Wright includes a one-liner inside a larger joke. The smaller joke mismatches everyday life with abstract science while the larger joke challenges what is signified by a job interview. Wright, the interviewee, is asking the questions and ultimately it is he who finds the interviewer unqualified. It is a funny twist, typical of a Wright routine, which forces the audience to acknowledge a mechanical system of hierarchy they probably take for granted.

Although impossible to illustrate by directly citing part of his act, one could easily surmise that Steven Wright carefully crafts his routines. He says about performing:

To me, being out in front of those people is fun, but mainly it's intense. And when you're in a situation that intense, it's serious work—it's like I'm at a blackboard trying to figure out this equation, except that I'm presenting jokes. ... It's so intense and precise for me; I have so many jokes to say and if I say them even a little bit differently they won't work as well—or if they're too fast or slow—how is the joke going that I'm saying, what should I do next ... there's no room for anything else. (Borns 245)

It appears that Steven Wright carefully renders his imaginary world down to the smallest detail. He knows that his act depends on the placement, choice, inflection, and timing of language as well as a shared awareness of its flawed mechanical properties. Like all good comedians, he is a master of the language and meaning of his culture, enjoying its idiosyncrasies and carefully sharing them with his audience.

Steven Wright, for the most part, does not use his comedy to make political statements. His themes are not controversial, as he is content deciphering and playing with the language of everyday life. George Carlin is from a different vein, more in the spirit of the previously discussed Lenny Bruce.

He is a stand-up comedian with an obvious opinion, who is on a mission to let us know what it is. Language and meaning for him are weapons of power and control. Carlin is out to use these weapons and to expose their use by others with power. He constantly employs irony to create awareness about the misuse of language and meaning to define our culture's modes of thinking. He interrogates meaning through comedy, spreading the message that all is not as words, gestures, and behaviors would have it seem.

Probably his most famous bit, often titled, "Seven Words You Can Never Say On Television," attacks censorship and directly focuses on language. The following is the lead-in to that bit and shows us how Carlin envisions himself in relation to the language of words:

I love words, I thank you for hearing my words. I want to tell you something about words that I think is important. They're my work, they're my play, they're my passion. Words are all we have really. We have thoughts, but thoughts are fluid. ... Then we assign a word to a thought. And we're stuck with that word for that thought. So be careful with words. (*The American*)

The bit then goes on to analyze why "shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits" can't be said on television, illustrating Carlin's playful and careful analysis of meaning and power. He says of the words, "Those are the heavy seven; those are the ones that will infect your soul, curve your spine,

and keep the country from winning the war" (*The American*). Then Carlin moves to break them down individually, making his audience concentrate on the sound of the words, "[Tits]'s is such a friendly sounding word. ... I mean new Nabisco tits and new cheese tits and corn tits ... and tator tits" (*The American*). He is reminding us through comedy that the power and meaning does not come from the actual word but from the thoughts and intentions behind them. To illustrate further he reminds his audience of two-way words that can be said in some contexts but not others. "It's okay for Curt Gowdy to say, 'Roberto Clemente has two balls on him,' but he can't say, 'I think he hurt his balls on that play Tony, don't you?'" (*The American*). With this bit, Carlin attempts to undercut the power of the individual words by making them sound silly and interchangeable and instead focusing our attention on the power of those who censor these words. His delivery presents the message that what we should really be worried about is not the words, but the fact that someone is in control of their use—certainly a provocative stance and it's delivered in an entertaining fashion.

Another of Carlin's favorite targets is America's romance with violence. He intelligently examines this love affair in many of his acts, mocking how people define violence and judge it. After a set on abortion that leads into a funny examination of the term, "sanctity of life," Carlin turns his attention towards capital punishment and TV violence, combining them with a Swiftian flare:

We made them both up, "sanctity of life" and the death penalty. Aren't we versatile? ... And I'm not talking about soft American executions like lethal injection. I'm talking about fucking crucifixion folks. Let's bring back crucifixion—a form of capital punishment the Christians and Jews of America could really appreciate. And I'd go a little further, I'd crucify people upside down, like St. Peter, feet up head down, and naked. I'd have naked upside crucifixions on TV once a week at halftime of the Monday Night Football game. (Carlin)

Carlin creates a nice build-up (much of which is not transcribed) before he delivers the last line at which the audience erupts. With that last line and his use of "crucifixion", he forces his audience to associate the socially acceptable violence of capital punishment and football with that of the death of Jesus and a very unacceptable and cruel form of sanctioned death. The bit goes on, describing how America could wipe out the national debt by televising creative and entertaining forms of capital punishment. The examples are very graphic and certainly would never happen, but his idea is somewhat plausible in light of what his audience knows about American culture and its love of witnessing violence. In this bit, Carlin successfully mixes meanings, creating an awareness about how our culture hypocritically defines violence. What violence signifies, both in word and in action, is held up to a critical light through comedy.

Steven Wright and George Carlin do what most good comedians do. They challenge the definitions and meaning we receive through language with creative and intelligent energy. They allow us to define the world in a different way for a while, possibly effecting some permanent alterations in how we use and interpret language. Stand-up comedy is one of our most valuable tools for evaluating and analyzing language. Like literature, it plays with language, even inventing it, but always keeping it fresh and alive in our minds.

## CHAPTER V

### A NIGHT AT THE IMPROV: STRUCTURE AND STAND-UP COMEDY

Discussing structure within stand-up comedy presents a kind of paradox, since most comics try to hide the fact that their act is very structured and even sometimes memorized down to the length of pauses and inflections of words. The laughs in a good stand-up routine almost seem to come by accident, as if the comedians are naturally reacting to the stimuli around them and in their head rather than carefully reproducing written and previously performed material. Stand-up comedians produce this illusion of a free-flowing, improvisational, one-sided conversation with the audience because they do not want to be perceived as simply telling jokes. They are much more than joke-tellers, they are joke artists, if you will, bottling the random movement of life into a structured performance. This structure is hidden behind their personae, which seek to be perceived as realistic and natural as the personalities one deals with every day. Jerry Seinfeld tries to appear inquisitive. George Carlin seems genuinely angry. Woody Allen appears truly to be a schlemiel. Steven Wright may appear weird, but his willingness to share his thoughts does not. In his speeches and in some of his literature, Mark Twain appears to be simply relating the factual details of a

story. Paul Fatout writes of Twain on the lecture circuit, "He did prepare, did not extemporize. Methodically following his own instructions, he wrote his talks, laboriously memorized them—he said he needed at least four days to work up an impromptu speech—then gave them so skillfully that they sounded like improvisations" (xxiv). The illusion of spontaneity and extemporization is absolutely necessary to success. Mark Twain himself illustrates this nicely in his essay, "How to Tell a Story," setting himself and other good stand-up comedians apart from mere tellers of jokes:

The humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it; but the teller of the comic story tells you beforehand that it is one of the funniest things he has ever heard, then tells it with eager delight, and is the first person to laugh when he gets through. And sometimes, if he has had good success, he is so glad and happy that he will repeat the "nub" of it and glance around from face to face, collecting applause, and then repeat it again. It is a pathetic thing to see. (*The Writings* 8)

So, the structure of stand-up comedy is to appear structureless—an intriguing paradox.

Despite all these efforts to conceal the structure of a stand-up routine, there is plenty of structure to be discovered within the carefully prepared



performances. The most basic arrangement found within every act is the repetition of a setup followed by a punchline. Jay Sankey writes, "the vast majority of jokes seem to involve, first, the communicating of a small amount of information and, second, a final piece of information that yields *a sudden shifting of perception*. The initially given small amount of information is what comics call the 'set-up,' and the final piece of information, the 'punchline'" (30-31). There are a few variations to this structure, but this is basically how stand-up comedians weave their magic. One variation involves adding additional punchlines, or tags, to an end of a joke. There is also what comedians refer to as callbacks, where "a joke makes reference to information contained in a previous joke" (Sankey 45). The setup for a callback can come from much earlier in an act or even from the act of a comic who was onstage earlier. Besides this basic structure of jokes, the comic also arranges segues, motifs, pauses, and themes. Careful organization and consideration of all these factors are what create a coherent and artful stand-up routine. To illustrate how this structure operates within stand-up comedy, I will be taking a slightly different approach from that I followed in the previous chapters. I will look at the performances of two comedians that don't exactly fit the mold of what one generally thinks of as stand-up comedy. Despite not fitting the traditional definition, there probably is no better way to succinctly describe their performances than by referring to it as stand-up comedy. The aforementioned Mark Twain and his humorous speeches

will be given some attention as will Lily Tomlin and her Tony award winning solo performance, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life In the Universe*. By analyzing their performances, I will be able to demonstrate the structure prevalent in stand-up comedy, while suggesting its American roots and its influence and importance in other, more traditional narrative forms, fiction and drama.

Mark Twain is America's greatest humorist, and, one could claim, one of its first touring stand-up comedians. Beginning his career as a comic lecturer in 1866, he continued to give speeches and lectures until a year before his death in 1910. For decades Hal Holbrook has had great success bringing Mark Twain alive again on stage by performing a kind of stand-up act from the recorded speeches and writings of Twain, showing the durability and timeless attractiveness of America's greatest humorist. Although Twain's lectures and speeches were often stories similar to his written work, elements of today's stand-up comedy abound in his humorous orations as they do in his collection of anecdotes and one-liners he so often recited during after-dinner speeches and interviews. The main difference between Twain's stories and traditional stand-up comedy is the duration of a joke—the time between each setup and punchline. The pace may be different but the rest of the structure seems to remain intact. Portions of his essay, "How to Tell a Story," could easily be construed as instruction on how to be a stand-up comedian:

To string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities, is the basis of the American art, if my position is correct. Another feature is the slurring of the point. A third is the dropping of a studied remark apparently without knowing it, as if one were thinking aloud. The fourth and last is the pause. (11)

Depending on the type of persona presented on stage, this description does not always hold true, especially the part about being "innocently unaware" of absurdities, but it nicely describes much of that with which a stand-up comedian is concerned. It almost perfectly describes the comedy of Woody Allen, Steve Martin, and Steven Wright, who all seem, much like Twain, to be simply relating the story of their lives in a comical manner. Paul Zall's description of Twain's storytelling structure could also be used to describe stand-up: "Mark Twain's humorous story telling relies on anecdotal interruptions and digressions to upset our expectations of a straight-forward narrative flow, or a well made plot that moves straight ahead. Instead, he prescribed that 'narrative should flow as flows the brook down through the hills and the leafy woodlands, its course changed by every boulder" [sic] (xviii). This is what stand-up comedians do with their jokes, creating the traditional plot with their setup and "upsetting our expectations" with their punchline.

As I mentioned earlier, the length of the setup is often shorter for today's stand-up comedians as they try to pack as many laughs as they can into their act, although it seems to me that some of the best comics still rely quite a bit on longer Twain-like narratives. Consider the similarities of structure in the following excerpts. The first is from Mark Twain's comical lecture, *Roughing It*, and the second is lifted from a Steve Martin performance. In this excerpt, Twain has come up with what he considers a superior way to mine quartz than shoveling it himself into a bucket and hauling it manually from pile to pile:

Why, I always knew there must be some tiptop, first-rate way to move that sand. At last I discovered it. I went to the boss, and told him that I had got just the thing, the very best and quickest way to get that sand from one pile to the other. And he says, "I'm awful glad to hear it." You never saw a man so uplifted as he was. It appeared to take a load off his breast—a load of sand, I suppose. And I said, "What you want now is a cast iron pipe about thirteen or fourteen feet in diameter, and, say, forty feet long. And you want to prop one end of that pipe up about thirty-five or forty feet off the ground. And then you want a revolving belt—just work it with the waste steam from the engine—a revolving belt with a revolving chair in it. I am to sit in that chair, and have a Chinaman down there to fill up the bucket with sand, and pass it up as I come

around and I am just to soar up there and tilt it into that pipe, and there you are. It is as easy as rolling off a log." You never saw a man so overcome with admiration—so overwhelmed. Before he knew what he was about he discharged me. He said I had too much talent to be fooling away my time in a quartz mill. (Fatout 56).

Here Steve Martin talks about losing his girlfriend.

I'm depressed. I guess I'm kind of thinking about my old girlfriend, you know what I mean. We were together about three years and um sometimes when I get on stage I kind of think about her because, you know, she'd travel with me and I'd be up here performing and I could hear her laugh. Kind of meant something to me, I guess. I guess I kind of miss her. And, um, she's not living anymore, so—you think that's funny or something? I guess I kind of blame myself for her death. We were at a party one night and we weren't getting along; we were fighting and she began to drink. And she ran out to the car; I followed her out and I guess I didn't realize how much she'd been drinking, she asked me to drive her home and I refused. We argued a little bit further. She asked me once again, "Would you please drive me home?" I didn't want to

so I shot her...with a shotgun. [Gun sound effect] Cut her right in half. [Martin laughs menacingly.] (Martin)

The themes and mood of the two jokes are very different but the structure is quite similar. Both weave a comical independent and personal tale with a clear beginning and end, would be considered to have long setups by the standards of stand-up comedians, and end with a simple sentence long punchline. Both excerpts are similar to the costume party bit I quoted from a Woody Allen routine in my chapter on persona (see page 37), filled with laughable lines and humorous depictions throughout but concluding with an oddly sensible, but ultimately unexpected conclusion. Many of the stand-up comedian's laughs are produced and much of his act is filled with these longer narratives, continuing the tradition of America's most respected humorist. Storytelling is still essential to the best stand-up comedians.

Twain was also very adept at short one-line jokes and reacting to the unexpected responses from his audience. I could extract hundreds of one-liners from his speeches. I chose this one: "Dying man couldn't make up his mind which place to go to—both have their advantages, 'heaven for climate, hell for company!" (Zall 49). This simple joke is very similar to the contents of a typical stand-up routine, easily reminiscent of a classic Henny Youngman one-liner like, "I just found a labor saving device—a rich old lady" (*The American*), to a post-modern Emo Phillips quip like, "I caught my girlfriend in bed with another guy,

and I was crushed. I said, 'Get off me, you two'" (qtd. in Stone 67). The structure is simple, timeless, and basic to stand-up comedy.

Interaction with the audience is also part of the structure of stand-up and Twain appears to be no slouch at it. Paul Zall writes:

At a New England society dinner Clemens had just finished a piquant address, when William M. Evarts arose with his hands in his pockets, as was his habit, and said: "Does it not seem unusual to this gathering that a professional humorist should really appear funny?" Clemens waited till the laughter occasioned by this sally had subsided, then arose, and, with his accustomed drawl, replied: "Does it not also appear strange to this assembly that a lawyer should have his hands in his own pockets?" (85)

I will explore the relationship between the audience and the stand-up comic more thoroughly in my next chapter, but Twain's witty reply is a nice example of how audience can be a principal element of a routine's structure.

Lily Tomlin won a Tony award for her performance in Jane Wagner's *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*. In this one-person comedy, Tomlin plays a dozen characters weaving together the story of a bag lady, a couple of prostitutes, a teenager, an older couple, a bored socialite, a divorced man, a good-hearted but spacey woman, and a feminist superwoman going through a mid-life crisis. Her performance is probably best described as a one-

person play, but Tomlin has done a lot of stand-up comedy and elements of that background are prevalent throughout the production. In fact, like the wandering seemingly unrelated narratives of a typical stand-up routine, *The Search* takes the audience on a journey that meanders from story to story. Wagner's play does include small details that connect all the characters and this is important to her overall theme, but basically each character is a separate part, presenting her own individual theme, just as each set of related bits is a separate part of an overall stand-up routine. Tomlin's performance is also reminiscent of stand-up because she is not in costume and has limited props. She is alone facing an eager crowd, creating a dozen characters through which she makes the audience laugh, feel, and think. Because of these factors, I prefer to think of the performance as a brilliant stand-up show.

Probably the most memorable character that Tomlin creates is that of Trudy the bag lady. We learn through her monologues that she wears an umbrella top for a hat, likes to roll down her pantyhose to her ankles and talks to a couple of friends from deep in outer space. She also delivers some wonderful bits. For instance:

I told him what drove me crazy, was my last creative consultant job with the Ritz cracker mogul, Mr. Nabisco. It was my job to come up with snack inspirations to increase sales. I had this idea to give cracker consciousness to the entire planet. I said, "Mr. Nabisco sir.



You could be the first to sell the concept of munching to the third world. We got an untapped market here. Why these countries got millions and millions of people, don't even know where their next meal is coming from. So the idea of eating between meals just never occurred to them. (*The Search*)

The joke follows the basic structure of any bit and is bunched in between other similar jokes mimicking a stand-up comedian's performance. There are numerous comical monologues of this sort in the performance, demonstrating the influence of stand-up comedy in the structure of the play.

Motif has always been important in literature, film, and theater and it also plays an essential and specific role in stand-up comedy. Throughout *The Search*, Trudy is trying to explain the difference between Andy Warhol's painting of tomato soup and an actual can of tomato soup, telling her alien friends that one is art and the other is soup. They don't seem to understand the difference between art and life even though she keeps repeating the explanation throughout the play. The question of what is art and what is life appears in other portions of the play and the motif concludes at the very end of the play with the aliens finally understanding. Trudy recounts, "they said it wasn't the play that gave them Goosebumps, it was the audience. I forgot to tell them to watch the play; they've been watching the audience. Yeah, to see a group of strangers sitting in the dark laughing and crying about the same things just knocked them out. They

said, 'Trudy, the play was soup, the audience art'" (*The Search*). The motif is recalled for the last time, ending the play nicely. In stand-up comedy, comedians refer to this kind of motif as a callback; a humorous theme from earlier in their act is repeated, bringing a previous context to the current joke. The above example of a dramatic motif is not very comedic but the structure is very much the same as a stand-up comedian's call back. In the scene just before this final scene, the audience witnesses more of a typical comedic callback. The callback is set up at the beginning of the play when rich, sophisticated, and bored Kate is in a conversation with her friend at a beauty salon where she just got her hair done. During the conversation she makes seven separate remarks about how bad her new haircut is, clearly describing it as full on one side and barren on the other. In the second-to-last scene, a full hour and a half later in the performance, she tells this story about stopping to watch Trudy and two prostitutes talk in the street:

I saw this young man go up, obviously from out of town, and he asked them, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" And the bag lady said, "Practice." And we caught each other's eyes, the prostitutes, the bag lady, the young man, and I, we all burst out laughing. There we were laughing together in the pouring rain. And then the bag lady did the dearest thing. She offered me her umbrella hat.

She said that I needed it more than she did because one side of my hair was beginning to shrink. (*The Search*)

The callback works wonderfully here for a nice warm-hearted laugh. The key for it working is that the scene from much earlier in the play focuses comically and memorably on Kate's hair. The setup has been made long ago and the punchline delivers the humor. Callbacks like this are an important structural element in most stand-up routines.

Although one may not usually think of Mark Twain as a stand-up comedian or *The Search for Intelligent Life in the Universe* as a stand-up routine, I believe that in many instances, there is no better way to describe them. Much of the structure mirrors that of a typical stand-up routine and laughter is often the result of all these performances. I find this relationship intriguing. I also find intriguing the feigned structurelessness that stand-up comedians and other artists bring to their performance. This structured creation of a spontaneous and realistic persona is important to a stand-up comedian's appeal and success.

## CHAPTER VI

### SO WHERE YOU FROM? AUDIENCE AND STAND-UP COMEDY

The last aspect of stand-up comedy I would like to discuss is audience. As I suggested in my introduction, stand-up comedy is unique because it is performed in front of an audience that will often perform back, sometimes because the comedian invites it, sometimes not. Just as in any art, stand-up comedians must be conscious of who they are creating their performance for and the added aspect of interaction and response requires a constant awareness of what is currently happening among the patrons. Jerry Seinfeld says:

Comedy is a dialogue, not a monologue – that’s what makes an act click. The laughter becomes the audience’s part, and comedian responds; it’s give and take. When the comic ad-libs or deals with a heckler, it gets explosive response because it’s like, ‘Hey, this is happening now! This isn’t just some pre-planned act.’ So whatever lends itself to that feeling is what makes comedy work – that live feeling. That’s why comics ask, ‘Where are you from?’ It brings a present moment to the show. (Borns 16)

In a successful act, the audience is a comic's best friend, bringing success directly through fits of laughter and indirectly by reinforcing the feeling that the performer on stage is real and spontaneous. Some of the best comics seek out the audience's participation, brilliantly weaving unknown lines from the audience with their own comic perception. Stand-up comedians also select language and style depending on the type of audience present, adapting and creating their routine in response to who is in front of them. Wayne Booth writes about literature, "True artists, we have been told again and again, take no thought of their readers. They write for themselves" (89). That may be true of literature, but in stand-up comedy the audience in front of the comedian is a full part of the artistic presentation, being as essential to the act as the theme, persona, language, and structure. It is rare not to see shots of people laughing in films of stand-up comedy performances or not to hear the laughter of the audience on an audio recording. The audience must cooperate if there is to be a truly great stand-up routine. To illustrate this relationship between stand-up comedy and audience, I will look at the comedy of Paula Poundstone and Chris Rock.

Paula Poundstone probably spends twenty to forty percent of her stage time conversing with her audience in a typical performance. She asks questions of certain audience members and plays with their responses, creating a truly spontaneous and hilarious routine. The following is excerpted from her HBO comedy special, *Cats, Cops and Stuff*:

Poundstone: What bad law experience did you have?

Woman in audience: Somebody didn't take care of a personal injury.

P: Somebody didn't take care of a personal injury? What personal injury? Were you in a grocery store and slipped or something?

W: Actually it was my mother.

P: It was your mother?

W: Yeah.

P: Your mother hurt you? And then you sued her. I didn't even realize you could do that. That's incredible. Like an idiot I've just been going to a shrink. (Poundstone)

Poundstone and the woman are able to clear up the "misunderstanding" and we find out that her mother was the one who was injured. The conversation then takes a bizarre and hilarious twist:

P: What happened? She was in a gas station and what happened?

W: She tripped and fell over a jackhandle and it tore her face open on a lube rack.

P: Ahhhh! Tore her face open on a lube rack! ... I can't believe you're telling a story like that.

W: You asked.

P: Well you could have just lied. I don't even feel like being here anymore. Tore her face open on a lube rack. (Poundstone)

Poundstone pounces on this opportunity taking full advantage of this bizarre twist. She makes sure we will remember it too, repeating "tore her face open on a lube rack" five times varying her emotion from ghastly surprise to anger in response to having to hear this story. The sequence works remarkably with the audience. The combination of a wonderful human surprise and Poundstone's skillful perceptions and reactions create a very funny moment. She fully acknowledges the role of the audience in her performances, crafting much of her act around the real life spontaneity of humanity.

Most comics don't interact with their audience to the extent that Poundstone does in her act. This doesn't mean that their awareness is any less keen, though. Stand-up comedians must constantly consider the personality and background of their audience members and adapt appropriately. In my experience, the stand-up comedians who come to the comedy club here in Grand Forks and succeed generally do a good job of getting to know their audience. They seem to always tell a joke or two about how flat or cold it is here and are aware of what types of jokes work better in the Midwest as opposed to other parts of the nation. I believe they also come to realize that audiences in Grand Forks, on average, are not as responsive and enthusiastic as they are generally used to. This kind of awareness is integral to a successful show, bridging the gap

between the performer and the members of the audience, so the comic can build the trust he needs to lead them into his hidden and alternate reality.

The awareness of audience that Chris Rock brings to his performances is recognizable in his language and his themes. The people who are generally in attendance at a Chris Rock show are young and versed in African-American culture and language. Being African-American himself, he utilizes his culture's identity to converse with his audience. His audience is certainly not limited to one race, as I believe he has a wide appeal, but his style and his words have a distinct culture in mind. Much like Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor, his act is a conversation with his own culture about their fears, loves, hates, and problems:

Long as you live you ain't never going to see no Black vice-president. Not while the president's white. Oh no. You will never see. They tell you never say never. I'm saying never. I'll never see no Black vice-president, not while there's a white president. You know why? Cause some Black guy will just kill the President. That's why. Fuck, I'll do it. If we had a Black vice-president right now, I couldn't wait to kill the President. What's going to happen to me? What they going to do? Put me in jail with a bunch of Black guys who'll treat me like a hero for the rest of my life. Even if they had a death penalty? What would happen? Get pardoned by the Black President. (Rock)



There is certainly a lot of Black pride in the persona Rock presents in this bit. He uses it nicely to point out the feelings his race sometimes has in this country when it comes to political power and political voice, insinuating that the only way to wrestle some control is through violence. In this instance, Rock may be correct in his assessment.

Rock's persona and themes more easily reach out to his culture of being young and Black in America, but does not make him inaccessible to people of other cultures. In fact, the relationship between the stand-up comedian and his audience make for an excellent opportunity to experience alternative perspectives. In order for audience members to be entertained at a comedy show, they must identify with the comic's persona to some extent, accepting his outlook while attempting to understand his cultural perspective. Anyone laughing at Chris Rock's routines must acknowledge the truth behind what he is saying, in some way empathizing with the situation Rock has presented.

All comedians do what Rock does to some extent. They all belong to a culture and direct their message and persona toward what they are familiar with. But I don't believe they intend to have a limited audience. A good comedian's audience is everybody and any cultural approach he may take is for the sake of persona and perspective. Stand-up comedy provides an excellent forum for exploring and discovering the different cultures we all hail from, providing infinite perspectives. Due to the large number of Jewish stand-up comedians in

this century, knowledge of the Yiddish language and the culture it speaks for has become more commonplace. Dick Gregory and other Black comics helped bring the perspective of being Black in America to Whites in the 1960s. Louie Anderson and Rosanne Barr offered the perspective of being overweight. It was these new and different perspectives that helped make the comedy fun and exciting to listen to. But it is the discovery by the audience that these new and different perspectives are not all that different from their own that allows for the continued building of community through laughter, which spells out success for the comic on stage. Much of what a successful comedian does is to link all the members of his audience together, no matter their culture, through a common human experience and perspective. A stand-up comedian must always remember that the members of his audience are members of humanity, and that they share in the success of the show, provide inspiration for its creation, and are an important part of its artistry.

## CHAPTER VII

### THANK YOU AND GOOD NIGHT: A CONCLUSION

In my readings about comedy I came upon this interesting description of the buffoon in literature. Although I don't think of stand-up comedians as buffoons, this excerpt from Susanne Langer's *The Comic Rhythm* seems almost perfectly appropriate:

[The buffoon is] the indomitable living creature fending for itself, tumbling and stumbling (as the clown physically illustrates) from one situation into another, getting into scrape after scrape and getting out again, with or without a thrashing. He is the personified *élan vital*; his chance adventures and misadventures, without much plot, though often with bizarre complications, his absurd expectations and disappointments, in fact his whole improvised existence has the rhythm of primitive, savage, if not animalian life, coping with a world that is forever taking new uncalculated turns, frustrating, but exciting. He is neither a good man nor a bad one, but is genuinely amoral,--now triumphant, now worsted and rueful, but in his ruefulness and dismay he is funny,

because his energy is really unimpaired and each failure prepares the situation for a new fantastic move.

Stand-up artists do roam from situation to situation, seemingly at random, encountering the bizarre, expecting the unexpected, coming to terms with their primal existence, and exposing the "halfness in nature" that Emerson tells us came with "the appearance of man" (248). The whole trip is frustrating and exciting and, especially, funny. And there is no moral righteousness in the stand-up artist; he is simply a perceiver, a seer, a shaman, who doesn't stop, but continues to discover and study the hidden world despite its incongruities and its halfness and his inevitable death. Maybe Langer's excerpt struck me as appropriate because stand-up artists have so much in common with the great buffoons—the great comedians—of literature. Is Lenny Bruce not like Falstaff, luring his audience, as Falstaff did Prince Hal, toward the anti-social and away from their inherited roles, allowing for a true awareness of what that role encompasses? Is Woody Allen not like Alexander Portnoy, both wandering through life trying to make sense of it, allowing their listeners the chance to make sense of it by witnessing their process? Is Chris Rock not like Huck Finn, both discovering the problems with their societies and struggling to fit in because of them? The similarities are there and the list could go on, showing the evolution of the great tradition of comedy present in history's literature, theater, and film into the recent and developing art of stand-up comedy. But even without the

comparison to the classics of other arts, one should hopefully see that stand-up comedians are truly artists, important to humanity's sense of humor, general well-being, and basic sense of who we are. We should thank them and respect them.

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