

A JEW FROM NEBRASKA:  
AN ACTOR'S ATTEMPT AT STAND-UP COMEDY

by  
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B.A. University of Nebraska, 2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of Theatre  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
2015

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## ABSTRACT

Stand-up comedy has been a major influence on American culture and has given the “Everyman” the ability to laugh at ourselves. Stand-up comedians have been performing in nightclubs, bars, clubs, and, most importantly, theatres for the past 60 years. Stand-up comedy can take many forms: a monologue of entertaining incidents that form a story, or a string of one-liners, or a succession of jokes.

This performance project and thesis is an examination and an attempt at the art form that we call stand-up comedy. It will answer the question of what is the best approach to writing comedy for an actor finishing his graduate acting program. It will also challenge the idea of simple joke-telling versus storytelling and examine the following question: Can *anyone* be a standup comedian? A research of the history, an analysis of the practitioners, and training from graduate studio work will support the discovery of a practical approach to writing and performing a stand-up comedy routine.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

To sum up on one page the many people I need to acknowledge in my theatrical life is almost impossible, but I will attempt to do so. First and foremost, I must thank my beautiful wife, Lauren, for putting up with me and going on this journey with me. As for my daughter Lila, I have to thank her for giving me material to write about and for being there for the hugs and kisses when I needed them.

I also would like to thank my chair, Christopher Niess, for not only helping me with this thesis but also mentoring me all through this graduate school process. I would also like to thank Kate Ingram, Julia Listengarten, Be Boyd, Donald Seay, Jim Helsinger, and Mark Brotherton for creating an atmosphere at theatre UCF that is inviting, challenging, and professional. I could not have asked for a better group of people to better my education and allow me to grow as an actor and a scholar. Last, but certainly not least, I thank my parents for telling me to chase my dream and they never once questioned my choice to be a part of this crazy world of theatre.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO STAND-UP

Why did the chicken cross the road? This question sets up a joke that has been told by millions of people. We may not find these particular jokes funny in our everyday lives, but humor is something that everyone in the world shares. Smile and laughter are universal throughout the world. It has been scientifically proven that laughter is good for the soul. According to Dr. Paul McGhee “ Your sense of humor is one of the most powerful tools you have to make certain that your daily mood and emotional state support good health.” (McGhee) We take a break in our lives and watch a funny movie, we see a funny play, or we go to a comedy club to see a comedian tell us jokes. At our large family gatherings, I am always the one making people laugh, making sure that I am the center of attention. My family constantly says I should be a stand-up comedian. This thesis seeks to explore whether I, Jeff Nathan, can be a stand-up comedian. I can make my family laugh, but can I do that for people who don't know me? How do I make someone laugh? How do I make someone smile? Is there a specific way to approach this? Is there a better way to go about this than simply holding the microphone and having a drink onstage and just saying a joke? In attempt to find answers to these questions, this thesis is going to look at the joke, the audience, and the comedian.

I am a trained actor; I'm not comedian, and I have never claimed to be. I have always been intrigued by stand-up comedy. Is this something that everyone can do? As actors, we have to be risk takers; we need to be able to put ourselves in situations that we have never been in before. We go to school for acting, and take classes to become better at it. Acting has been looked at (analyzed), studied, touched, played with, chewed up, and spit out into many different techniques. These techniques have been broken down into a few different categories, and these categories have been broken down further into other philosophies. Since returning to grad

school, a lot of my professional friends have asked me the same question—what is your philosophy on acting? I ask myself this question all the time and since returning to graduate school I realized that you should explore all of these techniques and decide what works best for you. It can be found through Meisner’s repetition, or through Stanislavski’s emotional recall, or even through Mamet’s study of practical aesthetics. Maybe even through Chekhov, where we see it then do it! In order to figure out what works best for me, I need to be open and willing to try anything. This academic mindset that I have created for myself is going to be applied to stand-up.

People tell me I am funny all the time, but do I have what it takes to get on a stage by myself and deliver jokes that I write? Throughout this thesis, I am going to learn what it takes to become a comedian. In this inquiry to discover what it takes to create successful standup, I will need to focus my search on several different functions in the standup process. These processes include the creative act of writing narrative, the method of communication of the narrative (i.e., ‘joke-telling’ vs. ‘storytelling’), the act of performance of that material. I will ask: “Can I be a successful comedian?” I will pursue this question through examining historical research surrounding the art form and successful practitioners (similar to my type/style). I will view the process of being a successful comedian as divided into several functions –Writing, Delivery, and Performance. The measure for success in this process will be the audience response (laughter) and the ability to be paid/hired. Once I have gathered information from this inquiry, I will consider the art form as a future career possibility. I will define success in stand-up comedy as performing in a professional comedy club and getting paid. With research of the history of stand-up comedy and a look at the successful practitioners, I will figure out my practical

approach to writing and performing a stand-up comedy routine. If I achieve the goal of being a stand-up comedian, will this be something that I plan to use to further my career?

Stand-up comedy has been a major influence in American culture and has given “everyman” the ability to laugh at ourselves. Stand-up comedians have been performing in nightclubs, bars, and most importantly, theatres for the past 60 years. Stand-up comedy can take many forms. It can consist of a monologue of entertaining incidents that may form a story, it can be a string of one-liners, or it can be a succession of jokes.

As a theatre practitioner, it is my responsibility to look at every angle of theatre. As graduate students, we are not only taking acting classes, voice classes, and movement classes but we are also looking at the study of theatre. So when it comes to stand-up comedy, it is a responsibility to look at more than just the great comedians. We must also look at history, test different ideas, and come up with our own conclusions as to how to do it successfully and how to do it to the best of our abilities.

Another question that will arise while following this thesis is as follows: Who is my audience? Will I be performing stand-up comedy in Omaha, Nebraska, or will I be performing it in New York City? I am going to have to look at myself and see what the stereotype I can use while I am on stage. Then I will ultimately be able to decide what type of comedian I am going to be. Am I going to be a joke-teller or a storyteller? What is going to work for me—getting up and making people laugh joke after joke or engaging them into one big laugh? As an actor, I get cast in a show and have the chance to tell stories. With my acting background, my gut instinct tells me that I am going to be a storyteller comedian.

To be a comedian, one first has to tell a joke! The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a joke as “a story that someone says to cause amusement or laughter, especially a story with a



funny punch line” (Oxford Online). *The Legacy of the Wisecrack* takes a look at the idea of a joke and has come up with a few different theories. One is the “Relief Theory,” which states that “in order for an individual to live in a society, he or she must adhere to certain rules, some of which results in violence being committed against his or her own body” (Tafoya 73). What this says to me is that humans struggle to live freely as individuals with aggressive appetites and urges, and we strive for comfort and acceptance. Contemporary sketch comedians commonly use this theory.

What is interesting to me about this theory is the two ways that a good joke can go. We can have a story, but the only way this story can be a set up into a punch line is if the story that you are telling has at least two potential outcomes. What I mean by this is, if I am telling a story and this theory can prove that we have two different views on the way we live our lives, then this set-up story can be a surprise to some and obvious to others. When telling a joke, the surprise can add to the ability to make people laugh. The obvious can also make us laugh because we are being told things that we already know what we generally do not mention out loud. The relief theory is a very important device that is used when a comedian gets on stage to talk about everyday life. We usually go to a theatre and comedy shows to watch life in heightened scenarios and to find a character or a story that we can relate to, and then, using the relief theory, we can then laugh at the obvious or even laugh at ourselves: “A good joke, according to the relief theory, gives a listener temporary entry into a different world, usually a world free of such constrictions” (Tafoya 73). An example of a joke would be, “People always say that divorce is hard, but it’s greatest thing in the world as I can eat and do whatever the fuck I want!”

The second theory I looked at was the Superiority Theory, which states, “laughter is fundamentally a sign that one person or a group is dominating while another is being dominated”

(Tafoya 74). I define this style as looking at a joke in three different ways. First, a joke that the stand-up comedian is telling is to make fun of someone more powerful than him; for example, “The President of the Company is so fat, I don’t know how he can do any type of running, especially a running a company.”

Next, we see a joke that the stand-up comedian tells to make fun of someone less powerful than himself—for example, “that homeless guy is so dirty even Mr. Clean said, ‘Hell no, I am not touching that.’”

The last kind of joke is dealing with stereotypes, which is a self-deprecating joke. In the research and videos I have watched, the self-deprecating joke is the most common icebreaker used by every stand-up artist. The first thing the audience does is look at the comic on stage and makes a decision about him. Before he talks, the audience has judged and made some sort of opinion about him. Because of this, the comic must be willing to stereotype himself or herself.

The third theory is the Incongruity Theory, which “explains that jokes and laughter are produced through the juxtaposition of incongruous elements” (Tafoya 75). This theory brings up the idea that we, as people, have sick minds or at least a willingness to go to dirty places. The joke or punch line has the ability to violate our mental patterns. A popular punch line that has been going around the younger generation is, “that’s what she said.” With this joke, we take any normal conversation and then add, “that’s what she said,” and this makes us think about something dirty without actually saying anything dirty. The Incongruity Theory is something that I will have to use when writing my material. This theory and self-deprecation are the most popular of the attempts to be funny. We find this style of humor in many popular shows like *Saturday Night Live* and many other sketch shows.

The fourth and last theory I describe is the poop joke theory. The idea is that we like to laugh at fart and feces jokes. *Blazing Saddles* worked using this theory. If you asked many people what their favorite scene was in that movie, they would say the “bean” scene. We see this style of comedy used on many television shows and back in the early 1970s and 1980s, this was the go-to joke for many sitcoms. We can still see this form used today in modern-day sitcoms.

So what is funny and who thinks the jokes or the joker is funny? John Limon writes in his book, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*: “If you (being the audience) thinks something is funny, it is. You may be puzzled by your amusement or disapprove of it, but you cannot be wrong about it” (Limon 11). A stand-up comic cannot focus in on someone in the crowd who is not laughing; that person may be deflecting or is just simply in a bad mood.

In general, people who attend a stand-up show are there to laugh or be entertained. This is an advantage that comedians sometimes forget—who is in the audience, what is the mood of the show? Are there people in the audience giving off big laughs or are they simply smiling and chuckling along?

As a stand-up, I will need to view and stereotype the audience as well. This is what I am going to call “playing the room.” The related questions are: Am I the only white guy in the room? Am I the only Jew in the room? Am I the only straight guy in the room? Will the jokes I have prepared land in this specific scenario or will I need to adjust my stories and delivery to fit the audience?

The following case study tests my theory of storytelling and whether storytelling is the right approach to my writing and performing standup. I will let the readers decide whether joke A or joke B below is more successful. I have come up with a simple joke that has a dark bit of humor in it and let my fellow classmates take a look at it. I then took this joke and turned it into

a story and tried to prove my idea wrong. After discussing this with my professor, I realized that I may have thought I know the answers, but I still needed to test the theory of the opposite.

### **Joke A**

A mother and her little girl get into a car accident. They are both rushed to the hospital. The mother is fine, but the little girl is told that she will never be able to see again. She starts to cry and the mother says to the little girl, "Don't worry. We can fix this." They go home, and the mother puts a special ointment and bandages on her daughter's eyes. The mother tells her daughter that this will all be fixed by tomorrow! The little girl is glad that her mother is doing this for her. The next morning, she wakes up and excitedly says, "Mom, come in here and take off the bandages." The mother takes them off and the little girl says, "Mom, I still can't see." The mother looks at her daughter and says, "I know, Honey...April Fools' Day!"

### **Joke B**

A mother and her daughter are driving down the road and get hit by a drunk driver. They are rushed to the hospital and put into separate rooms to be checked. The mother, Sherry, is fine, but her daughter, Leslie, is still being examined.

The doctor pulls Sherry aside and says, "I'm sorry, but your daughter is never going to be able to see again." Leslie, who was in the other room, overhears this conversation and starts to cry. Sherry runs up to her daughter and tells her, "Don't worry. We will fix this. Everything is going to be all right." They both get released from the hospital and go home.

On the way home, they stop at a store and pick up a special ointment and bandages. Sherry tells her daughter that this ointment will work by tomorrow morning and then everything

will be okay. That night, Leslie lies down in her bed and her mother puts the ointment on her eyes and wraps the bandages.

Her mother says, “Goodnight, Honey. I love you and I will see you tomorrow.” Leslie is so excited that she doesn’t want to go to sleep, but she eventually does. The next morning, the little girl wakes up and yells, “Mommy! Mommy! Come in here and please take off the bandages. I can’t wait to see you.”

So Sherry rushes into the room and removes the bandages. Leslie cries out, “Mommy! I still can’t see,” and her mother says, “I know, Honey...April Fools!”

After reading these jokes aloud to two separate rooms full of people, I received two different types of responses. Joke A, when read aloud in one room, had most of the people laughing. I then read Joke B in a completely different room and had a very interesting and different response. Instead of laughter, more people were groaning or saying things like “oh, that is terrible.” Now what I think happened in the second room with Joke B was this—when you give people names and add more life to a story, then people become more interested in the characters. Audiences want to feel empathy for the characters, and when I made the situation more specific, they all wanted good things to happen to the little girl, which is using Relief Theory. This was an interesting finding when comparing joke-telling versus storytelling. What would it have been like if I had not used characters in the third person and instead used my family or myself in these scenarios? This answer now leads me to Joke C and making the woman my sister and the little girl my niece.

### Joke C

So last week my sister and my niece got into a car accident. A drunk driver hit them! Don't worry, they are both alive. They were rushed to the hospital. My niece, Chrissie, was really scared because she was put into a separate room from her mom. It turned out that my sister, Sally, had just a few scratches, but my niece is a little different story.

They told her that she wasn't going to be able to see again. Now Sally is a doctor and she knew that was a quick judgment call and said to Chrissie, "Everything is going to be okay because this was just an early diagnosis."

I need to tell you that my sister is a little hippy-dippy and believes in holistic medicines. She told my niece that she was going to be fine and all they needed to do was stop by the store and she would whip up a remedy that was going to work in one night. My niece was happy to hear this, so they immediately went to the store and got everything they needed, and then Sallie put the ointment on Chrissie's eyes. Sallie wrapped a bandage around Chrissie's head and said, "I love you, Honey. I will see you tomorrow."

Chrissie was so excited that she almost didn't want to go to sleep, but eventually she did. The next morning, Chrissie woke up and yelled, "Mommy, come in here! Please take off the bandages! I can't wait to see you!" So Sallie rushed into the room and removed the bandages. Chrissie cried out, "Mommy! I still can't see!" Sallie looked at her and said, "I know, Honey. April Fools!"

I presented Joke C to another room of people and this worked out the best for me. I had people in the room saying, 'Oh, that's terrible,' and laughing at the same time. So by telling things about my family and myself the audience felt it was okay to laugh. Now what I had done was successful in my view and went away from the rules that I was supposed to follow. Yet

Joke C combined all three of the major theories and gave me some insights into what I plan to write.

According to Greg Dean, a teacher of stand-up comedy for over 30 years and the author of *Step by Step to Stand-Up Comedy*, the setup should be no longer than “5 lines, 3 lines, 4 lines, or 6 lines if you have to” (Dean 32). So if this is the case, then I have to take the joke, add more personal details to it, and add a lot more than 6 lines, so therefore I think it will not work.

I have added many personal things to this joke and taken it to another level. By adding names, I am making it a more complete story. This will challenge my idea of storytelling vs. joke-telling and which is better. There are many successful storyteller comics, and there are many thriving joke-teller comics in the business. So which is better for me, and which one is better in general for an audience? Stand-up comedy is a great American art that involves writing and trust not just with oneself but also with the audience. In order for me to begin the journey of writing my own material, I feel it is my responsibility to research all types of comedy and be willing to test what is considered to be the norm. Many comedians will tell you the only way to do stand-up is to follow rules and guidelines *and then break them*.

Along with joke theories, I also looked at a brief history of stand-up. Interestingly, Mark Twain is considered as one of the first comics. He toured the country with his humorous lecture tour in 1886. His book *The Legacy of the Wisecrack* put together a wonderful timeline of stand-up comedy, and I feel it is important to include this in my paper. It is important to me to see specific and major moments in stand-up comedy’s brief history.

### Legacy of the Wisecrack—A Stand-Up Comedy Timeline

- **1840:** Vaudeville begins when Boylston Hall in Boston opens its summer season.
- **January 17, 1856:** Samuel Longhorn Clemens makes a humorous speech at the celebration of Benjamin Franklin's 150th birthday.
- **October 2, 1866:** Mark Twain begins his first lecture tour.
- **1880s–1890s** Charley Case, a vaudevillian, began performing humorous monologues directly to the audience using no costumes or props; considered to be the birth of stand-up.
- **1895:** Beatrice Hereford begins performing comic monologues in London.
- **1909:** Black vaudeville circuit is established.
- **1909:** Will Rogers simplifies his act, goes away from the horses and creates a solo act involving rope tricks and humorous patter.
- **1911:** Cabaret-style entertainment becomes more popular and available in New York City.
- **January 16, 1920:** Prohibition begins in the United States, forcing liquor establishments to become smaller and less visible. Crowds are smaller, entertainment is simplified, and venues are more intimate. Consequently, emcees take on more important roles as entertainers.
- **1930–1955:** The Borscht Belt is in its heyday.
- **June 20, 1948:** *The Toast of the Town*, a television show with a vaudeville format, begins with Ed Sullivan, a columnist for *The New York Daily News*, as



the host and producer. Four years later, the show's name is changed to *The Ed Sullivan Show*. It runs until 1971.

- **September 27, 1954:** *The Tonight Show* begins with Steve Allen as the host.
- **1955:** *Mort Sahl at Sunset*, the first stand-up comedy album is recorded.
- **July 13, 1959:** A *Time* magazine article entitled, "The Sickniks," announces the new wave of stand-up comedy.
- **April 12, 1961:** The comedy album, *The Button-Down Mind of Bob Newhart*, wins the Grammy for album of the year.
- **October 1, 1962:** Johnny Carson begins hosting *The Tonight Show*.
- **1966:** The term stand-up comedian is added to the Oxford and Webster dictionaries.
- **August 3, 1966:** Lenny Bruce is found dead.
- **September 17, 1970:** The Flip Wilson Show becomes first nationally televised show hosted by a black entertainer.
- **April 1972:** Mitzi and Sammy Shore and Rudy Deluca open the Comedy Store on the sunset strip.
- **May 1974:** Richard Pryor releases "That Nigger's Crazy" album and wins a Grammy award.
- **October 11, 1975:** *Saturday Night Live* debuts. A cast full of stand-up comedians perform sketch comedy.
- **October 23, 1976:** Steve Martin hosts SNL and brings the national spotlight to stand-up comedians.

- **March 1979:** *The Comedy Store* is averaging 2.5 million viewers a year, and Comedians for Compensation is formed. Comedians strike and then are paid at least \$25 a set. *The Comedy Book* begins.
- **June 9, 1980:** Richard Pryor attempts suicide by dousing himself with liquor and setting himself on fire.
- **1981–1989:** The boom years: Stand-up comedy is in its heyday.
- **February 3, 1982:** *Evening at the Improv*, a stand-up comedy shows aired for six years.
- **March 29, 1986:** Whoopi Goldberg, Robin Williams, and Billy Crystal host *Comic Relief*, produced by HBO to raise money for the homeless.
- **November 1989:** Time Warner Launches *Comedy Central*.
- **May 25, 1992:** Jay Leno begins hosting *The Tonight Show*.
- **December 23, 2003:** New York Governor George Pataki grants Lenny Bruce a posthumous pardon for his 1964 obscenity conviction. (Onstage, he used the word *cocksucker* and was arrested immediately after he left the stage.)
- **December 10, 2005:** Richard Pryor dies.
- **April 29, 2006:** Stephen Colbert roasts G.W. Bush at the White House correspondents' dinner.
- **June 22, 2008:** George Carlin dies.

The history of the stand-up comedy timeline is very interesting for a few reasons as stand-up is an art form that hasn't been around that long. Some major points in his timeline refer to *The Tonight Show*, which played a major part in showcasing comedians. Recording comedy

show albums used to be the best way to get material out to the mass media and to make money.

This was well before *Comedy Central*, and *HBO* and even the more popular *YouTube*.

Recording a comedy album became so popular and successful that the Grammy Awards had to create a new category for it.

This timeline, however, discusses more than just stand-up. A successful stand-up artist wants to be more than just that as they want to be a comedian. They want to break into the business any way they can. That can be through stand-up or sketch or even improv comedy. To reach what some comedians say is the highest honor of stand-up comedy is to be able to host *Saturday Night Live*. A comedian's ability to turn material into sketches or television shows will allow him or her to become famous. Stand-up comedy allows a comedian to showcase more than just acting talent, as it also allows him or her to show off writing ability and character play.

Stand-up can sometimes be confused with a one-man show that is more character driven. The one-man show has been around a lot longer than stand-up. I got asked this question a lot when working on this project: What is the difference between stand-up comedy and a one-man show? To me, there are three major differences. First, you have a microphone when you perform at a comedy club. Second, the infamous fourth wall, the ability to improvise in stand-up, and the allowance to play off of the audience are things that we don't see in one-man shows. Last but not least, it's about the audience's expectations. When we go to a comedy club, we go out to have drinks laugh and have a good time. When we go to a one-man show, someone in the audience hands you a playbill and usually you are in some form of a theatre space, and there is some technical aspects to the show. When we go to a comedy club, we could be walking into a theatre or we could be walking in to a basement or a random room that has been converted into a comedy club.

## CHAPTER 2: COMEDY AND COMEDIANS

A stand-up comedian gets on the stage, grabs the microphone, and attempts to do a different type of act or a different approach to an older style that has been done. Stand-up comedians have to work very hard at being *avant garde*. A comedian should not do the same joke as another comedian, so they have to figure out another way of telling that joke. Male, female, black, white, brown, Asian, gay, straight, old, young—all of these types of people can perform stand-up, so how do we classify them in other ways other than their sexuality, skin color, or age? This next chapter is going to focus on categorizing the different types of stand-up and will allow me to see where I fit in best. The one major point before I categorize comedians and the different styles is this: Every comedian is playing some form of a character or taking on a persona.

I will begin with Dark Comedy, which deals with disturbing subjects such as death, drugs, terrorism, and war. There are only a few comedians out there who have made a living telling jokes about subjects that are not a part of our everyday cultural discussion. Now when dealing with comedy, there are some things I personally do not find funny just as there is content that I don't want to deal with. Like going to the theater, we go to comedy clubs to hear outlandish things that don't occur in our everyday lives and to give ourselves the permission to laugh. This style can be considered taboo and has been referred to as black comedy. One of the most famous dark comedians who paved the way for all of stand-ups is Richard Pryor. He took some of the darkest moments in his life and was willing to spin them into comedy. He was a groundbreaking comedian who had zero rules. Pryor is classified as one of the best dark comedians but he also fits into more than one category and that's what made his work so

groundbreaking. Other influential comedians that fit into the dark comedy category are Chris Rock, Daniel Tosh, Seth McFarland, and many more.

Blue Comedy, or “going blue,” refers to the style of comedy that allows being gross for the sake of being gross. Blue Comedy and Cringe Comedy are very similar to me. I define Cringe Comedy as a comedy of embarrassment in which the funny part comes from inappropriate actions or phrases. Even though some comedians would state that these are different styles of comedy, I feel that Blue Comedy and Cringe Comedy are one in the same.

Usually we see comics talking about everyday lives and going further with details and descriptions that we don’t find normal to chat about. The topic of sex is usually the comedian’s go-to when they “go blue.” The comedian will find a topic that is not discussed in everyday society and will go in to great detail for the sake of the joke. For a while, this was a trend in comedy, but because of the Internet, the ability to shock people has become more of a challenge. Blue comics now have to find more ways as they can to push the envelope or make the audience think, “I can’t believe they said that.”

Sarah Silverman is a working comic who has made her career by taking her material as far as she can go. She uses her pretty appearance to give off the impression that someone who looks like her can’t be saying ridiculous and crude things. Not only is Sarah Silverman a blue comic but she also uses the Incongruity Theory to her advantage. Applying this theory to blue comedy feels like a great approach because the comedians are playing with the audiences’ expectations. The blue style of comedy works for some crowds and, to me, the purpose of it is to make the audience feel uncomfortable. When we, as humans, are put in uncomfortable situations, we laugh. Other stand-up comics that I consider blue are Bob Sagat, Dave Attell, and Martin Lawrence.

Alternative comedy is different from the traditional punch-line jokes. This form of comedy can be classified into a few different groups. Observational comedy is a very popular type of stand-up. This is when a comedian takes an everyday occurrence or action and discusses it in greater detail. For example, Jerry Seinfeld did an entire 15-minute bit about airline food. All he needed to do was bring up the topic of airline food, which is not discussed very often, then he went into this topic in great detail. In this style of comedy, we usually do not find a punch line and we decide to laugh at any moment throughout the discussion. Another sub-form of alternative comedy is satire. Satire can be defined as “humor that shows the weaknesses or bad qualities of a person or group of people” (Oxford Online). A major use of satirical humor can deal with the government. Some of today’s best uses of satire stem from *The Daily Show*. This style of comedy has opened the doors to many stand-up comedians and comedy. This show launched one of the biggest satires ever to grace the television, *The Colbert Report*.

Slapstick comedy can also be put into alternative comedy. This is one of the oldest styles of comedy and goes back all the way to the Greeks. Slapstick usually involves over-exaggerated physical gestures. To me, the best examples of slapstick are Charlie Chaplin and *The Three Stooges*. The closest type of slapstick that we still see today would be the show *Jackass* on MTV.

Improv comedy is the art of making something up on the spot with hopes that it is funny. This kind of comedy can be broken down into different categories—short form and long form. Short-form improv generally consists of short scenes that are character-driven moments. You find the joke then get off the stage. The television show *Who’s Line Is It Anyway* has made this style of comedy popular. In contrast, long-form improv is more of a theatrical style of comedy that uses a format called a “Harold,” which was developed by Del Close.

Improv is a very important aspect for stand-up comedy because of the actors' ability to work on the spot. When you are on stage, you never know what jokes are going to work or how the audience is going to behave, so the ability to roll with the punches and create on the spot is a great tool in stand-up. Many of the famous sketch artists and *Saturday Night Live* cast members came from this style of comedy. Robin Williams's style of stand-up was as close to improv as we, the audience, can get. He had an ability to look at the audience, have a few jokes planned, and then decide not to use them and simply riff off on the audience. He may have had some planned material when he first hit the stage, but more than likely he threw that out the window. While watching a few of his sets, I saw Williams take a hat from a woman in the audience and spend five minutes doing jokes that he was making up on the spot. His ability to change stories and characters on the spot without a thought was one of his greatest gifts to comedy.

Character comedy is humor derived from the creation of a persona by the comedian. This usually involves the comedian playing an exaggerated stereotype. This technique was used by many major players in the comedy world, and I feel this style of comedy allows the audience to laugh at themselves without actually admitting they, too, act like the stereotype.

These comedians have the ability to take on a stereotype and then create an entire character. To me, this is one of the closest things to acting that any stand-up comedian can attempt. For example, Andy Kauffman was one of the first stand-up comedians I heard about. He was able to be the same character for the entire time he was onstage. When he stepped on the stage, we never knew who was actually going to be up there. Another huge name in the character comedy genre is Larry the Cable Guy. His original birth name is Daniel Whitney, and he was a failing comedian who couldn't make it big in the stand-up world. Then he created the redneck stereotype character that launched his career into stardom. Larry the Cable guy is one of

the highest-grossing comedians ever. It took creating this character and then telling similar jokes for him to be successful.

Character comedy has launched a lot of movie careers as well. With the success of the characters that the comedians have created, the film industry from time to time has gotten involved and created major motion pictures based on these characters. A few other character comedians are also worth mentioning, such as Paul Rueben, Andrew Clay Silverstein, Stephen Colbert, and many more.

Insult comedy is a style where the comedian goes completely out of his or her way to insult someone. That someone can be another comic in the lineup or it can even be an audience member. One of the best insult comedians was Don Rickles. He had a way about him that could allow other people to laugh at themselves. Don Rickles wasn't happy until he made fun of every person in the room. I think because no one was off limits, this made his style of humor acceptable. Another famous insult comedian is Andrew Dice Clay, who made headlines for his insults and saying things that ticked people off.

Insult comedy is a very dangerous style of comedy, however, and can only be done by the right person. This is an easy way to get yourself kicked out of clubs, not asked to perform anymore, or even get into fights with club owners or audience members. Some club owners have told me that they do not like to hire insult comics because they are running a business and have to believe that the customer is always right. If a comic gets on stage and belittles an audience member and he or she actually takes offense, then the club owner more than likely has to take the customer's side of the story.

Prop comedy is a genre that makes use of ridiculous objects or takes everyday objects and uses them in humorous ways. One of the more successful prop comics is Carrot Top. He is



known for having gigantic trunks on stage filled with random everyday objects that he transforms into goofy props. His delivery of self-deprecation and props has made him what he is today, a major headliner in Las Vegas. The most famous prop comic is Gallagher, who has performed in more than 10 television specials and is known as *the* prop comic. I remember watching him while growing up and do not remember him telling jokes. All I cared about was when was he going to get to his bit when he would pull out his big hammer. The shows always ended the same way, with him smashing watermelons. He did one thing well and people would pay over and over again to see it happen.

Impressionism or mimic comedy is the ability to copy another person's voice or mannerisms with intent to poke fun at that celebrity or put that celebrity in a situation that we wouldn't normally see him or her in. One of the most famous moneymakers was the ability to impersonate Elvis Presley. This was not used to make fun of Elvis, but to give the impression that Elvis was really performing. From this, we see comedians realizing a way to make fun of someone and allow themselves to become him or her onstage. This style of comedy allows the comic to take things as far as he or she can with insults, and we as an audience accept it because it is simply someone pretending to be a celebrity. This art form has created many celebrities based on their impersonations of celebrities. Dana Carvey had his rise to fame on SNL while impersonating the president of the United States. His ability to take on the voice and inflection of the president allows the audience to see this character in odd situations. It's not very often we think about the president of the United States doing everyday things, but when Dana Carvey or Will Ferrell perform these characters, we can't help but watch and chuckle. Will Ferrell's impression of President Bush was so successful that it became a Broadway show.

Musical stand-up is the act of making people laugh through music. There are a few interesting things about this style of comedy. It's also an interesting approach to stand-up because you are now giving the audience more than just a standard monologue or set, you are giving them a concert. Throughout the past 10 years, it's become more popular as a style of comedy. Jack Black and Kyle Gass both had solo comedy careers, but when they got together and created "Tenacious D," they turned stand-up comedy into a sold-out rock shows. This has also led to the two of them to getting their own television show.

A very popular girl duo has formed from musical comedy named "Garfunkel and Oats." Like the two comedians in "Tenacious D," these two ladies were solo stand-up comedians who had some success, but with the combination of comedy and music, they accelerated their careers.

I can't talk about musical comedy without mentioning Weird Al Yankovic. He made playing the accordion cool and funny. He also loved to use his style of comedy as parody. He started out playing in coffee bars and realized he stood a better chance playing open mics. After Weird Al got his break, he launched himself into musical comedy stardom. He has sold millions of records and is still going strong today.

The last of the comedy styles I am going to discuss is ventriloquist comedy or the art of throwing a voice into a puppet character. This skill has been around for years and has the ability to take on many different comedy forms. Ventriloquism allows a comedian to take on as many characters as he or she wants during a stage performance. It is very entertaining to watch someone talk through a puppet without moving his or her mouth. If previously never seen live before, the thrill of that talent is simply enough. This allows the comedians to not worry about the jokes, but to simply just show off their skills. The best part about this style of comedy is the fact that these comedians can get away with anything. Sometimes people don't want to talk

about sensitive subjects, but if you talk about terrorism through a dummy, then it is acceptable to poke fun because the comic is not speaking—the puppet is.

Jeff Dunham has changed the game for ventriloquist comedy. He is one of the highest-grossing comedians of all time. Jeff's style is to play the straight man while having conversations with all types of fake people. Again, because of this, no topic is off limits because it is coming out of a dummy's mouth.

With all of this research done, I now need to figure out where I will fit in. What type of comedian do I want to be? I still haven't answered the question that I posed earlier: Do I want to be a joke-teller or a storyteller? I have spent a lot of time watching different comedians do their shows, but one comedian stood out to me.

The last comedian I want to discuss is Louis C.K., who, for me, is one of the funniest comedians today. He gets up on stage and performs his act, which is simply talking about his life. He loves to say things that people think but would never say out loud. What is great about his style of comedy is that he is talking about his everyday life. Everyone wakes up everyday and does something and that is what he talks about—that something. This approach is great because he will never run out of material.

As actors, we are always trained to be people watchers, and what better way to be funny than to talk about everyday people. Now after watching countless hours of stand-up material, the one thing I am noticing about all legitimate comics is that there is a trend. They get onstage and attempt to make you laugh. The trend that started in the 1880s is still prevalent today. If the entertainment industry finds a comedian funny or interesting, then it will find a way to put him or her on television. Jerry Seinfeld, Kevin James, Rosanne Barr, Chris Rock, Louis C.K., and many others started out as comedians and then had very big careers in the entertainment industry.

### CHAPTER 3: MY COMEDY

What type of comedian do I want to be? If I am cast in *Hamlet* in the role of the protagonist Hamlet, then I should do research and see what other people have done in this role. I am not going to completely copy them because I am an actor and a different person, so therefore I will bring something new to the table. Comedians learn from each other, challenge each other, and usually support each other. How do I fit into the mold of comedy? What type of comedian am I going to be? According to many comics, I need to take a look at myself in a full-length mirror. What would an audience see when I walk on stage? Would they see a sexy young man? Do I look like a slacker, or a computer nerd, or perhaps a father? When people see me, do they see an accountant or former athlete who has let himself go? What does my voice sound like to other people? Do I have an accent? What do I bring to the table?

I need to consider the impression I give to the audience when writing material. You can address your looks any way you like. Let's say you are very thin and look like a computer geek. You can embrace it: "I'm proud to be a geek." Or you can deny it, but you need to address it. If you are average looking and there's nothing about you that sticks out, make sure to tell the audience something personal about yourself at the beginning of your set.

I'm fat, but I know I can't make all of my jokes about my weight. If I do this, then I am limiting my material. However, I do have to address it somehow because the audience will not relax until I acknowledge it. They will be distracted if I don't. Right or wrong, that's just the way it is. When I go onstage, I don't want to give off any other impression other than the fact that I am who I am. I am an overweight guy from Nebraska with a nice head of balding hair. If I go onstage and admit all of these things, then I can get into my material. I had to spend a long time stereotyping myself. This is one of these things that you can't ask your wife or your friends

to do because they have feelings about you. When an audience makes a judgment about me, they do not know me and do not have any feelings towards me besides what I look like. It is amazing to me that all of this has to happen before I even open my mouth. I open my mouth and what do I sound like to them? I have a deep voice that I feel fits my body. My voice isn't quirky or odd, as it's just my voice. If I had something really interesting about my voice, I could use that to my advantage. This is everything I see about myself. Now what do random strangers see about me?

Being on the University of Central Florida campus has allowed me to walk up to random people and ask them a question. I asked a lot of people to point out something physical about me. I didn't want to give them a specific prompt and I didn't tell them to be negative, I just asked the question and told them to be as honest as possible. I tried as hard as I could to remind them that they weren't going to hurt my feelings. I simply wanted them to very quickly stereotype me. I did this completely at random and didn't care whom I asked—female, male, black or white. I wanted to hear from anyone who would see a show. Through this process, I received the information that I am overweight, don't dress very well, and balding and a few people went ahead and said I wasn't very attractive. I didn't only hear negative things as some people told me I have very nice eyes and that I look like a big teddy bear. This was a very vulnerable thing that I did to myself, but I felt it had to be done. All of this was very helpful information to receive because, when I finally get up onstage, then I will be able to know what random people think about me.

“Where do you get the ideas for your material? The answer, of course, is from my life” (Dean, 33). He brings up a valid point. Why not write about yourself? This is what you know best. Advice that I was given by more than one comic is to make sure I didn't write something

that I'd think the audience was going to find funny. So with this information, I think it is important to remind myself when beginning to write not to try and be funny. All of these are excellent points that prompted me to write stories about my life. I am going to be a storyteller. I am going to get up onstage, grab the microphone, and tell a story. I am not going to be a joke-teller, and so I have to pray to the comedy gods that my stories are entertaining and funny. So what do I write about? What is so different about me that people will want to hear? I came to the conclusion that I am not that different than most people, but I have the ability to use the training I have received while attending graduate school to be able to tell a story. I am a happily married man and just had a beautiful baby girl. That was one of my biggest life-changing moments. Through the entire process, I went through many ridiculous and crazy things that I don't think a lot of people talk about. I was going to write about becoming a father. I could tell my story that many people go through and don't always talk about.

### **Material**

“Hello, my name is Jeff. I am a father.” These are the best and scariest words that have ever come out of my mouth. I am in charge of someone else's life. I can screw up someone else, not just myself. No pressure, right? Before I get into this, mad props to the single parents out there, as you are better than me. You are. I am not as good of a person as you. I will say that to anyone who wants me to say it. Yes, so anyways, let's start at the beginning.

Pre-baby talk, the only person I have had to take care of is me. Here we go, now I found out I'm going to be a father! You can look at me and think to yourself, “Holy shit, this guy is going to raise a kid. He is too fat to raise a kid.” Well, guess what? I don't have a say in this anymore, unless we are talking about wire hangers and face it, y'all, it's not that type of show.

So anyways, now that we are all uncomfortable ... a little about myself. I was born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska. I am sure you haven't met anyone from Nebraska because we are what most people call one of those fly-over states. If you moved across the country and had to drive through our wonderful state, then you would hate it even more because it's so damn flat and it goes on for miles. Most of the time when I meet someone and they ask me where I am from and I tell them, they always say, "Wow!" or some other bullshit like they have never met anyone from there. Or else I meet the dumb ass that says, "Oh, you are from Nebraska, and so do you know Jenny?"

I am just going to save you all the big to-do and introduce myself as a Nebraskan, so congratulations to you. Football, Omaha Steaks, and corn—that is all we have and that's what we love, probably in that order. Now if you are playing live bingo, I have a real stunner for you—I'm also Jewish—yes, a *JEW* from Nebraska. So go ahead and take out that life bingo card and cross off B17. You're welcome!

Any who, so I am going to be a father and that is a freaky thing! Whenever you hear that phrase (I'm pregnant) from your wife, you sit there and think to yourself: *Should I be doing this?* I didn't get to here by myself. It came from my wife and I found out a little differently.

I came home from a typical day at work and nobody was home, except for my dog and me, and so I went to the kitchen and got a soda. Sorry, pop. I'm from Nebraska and that's how they or we say it. Anyways, I looked into the trashcan in the middle of our kitchen. I don't know why I was looking to see what was in the trashcan. Still, I looked into the trashcan and saw a box for a pregnancy test. I started thinking to myself: *When is the last time I had sex? Oh, boy, this could be a problem.*

Then I started thinking: "Why is the box in the kitchen," and I'm sure you were all wondering the same thing, so then I started thinking was this just perfectly

placed by my wife so that I would figure something was going on! Is she just trying to soften the blow? Is she trying to give me a little bit of insight as to what's about to happen for the rest of my life? Then I thought: *Nah, she probably just threw the box away.* I mean there's no way that she has the smarts to plan that out...right? I took a deep breath and headed to the restroom because after long day at work I'm going to the restroom to do restroom things. What? I am a man and men shit! I looked down again in the trashcan and I saw a pregnancy test, you know one of those sticks! My first instinct was to grab the damn thing, but I didn't want to touch it to because I knew it had piss on it. But I also knew I needed to see what it said and, of course, the damn thing is face down. Then I go through a dilemma: *Do I touch the piss stick or go ask the wife? Am I ready for this yet?*

So I grab it. I take a huge deep breath, flip it over, and see two lines. *Oh my god, oh my god, this is a big deal, this is just a huge deal, holy lord! I mean I can't believe the thing says two lines. This is the greatest and scariest moment of my life. I mean, am I right? Two lines!*

*Wait a minute, wait a minute, what in the world does that mean? What in the fuck do the two lines mean? Two lines? Are we pregnant or are we not? Why does this have to be so complicated? Why can't it just say, YES? No, no, no, it has to be two lines or one line, or blue, or pink, or red, or a plus, or red minus, or a smiley face, or a frown face, or thumbs up, or thumbs down, or check or minus or whatever the fuck it needs to say.*

It would be really funny if it just said, "Congratulations." But then you know the advertising guy is messing with you because congratulations work both ways. It's just some asshole that came up with this to soften the blow if you weren't planning. Two gentle lines that say your life is changing. Here's an idea, YES, or NO! Two lines—that is all we get, and now I'm panicking because I don't have a damn clue what it means!



So then I have to run back to the kitchen to look at the box to see what it means, and guess what two lines mean? “*Pregnant!*” I’m not sure about what people go through or what other people are thinking or what actually goes on in other people’s heads, but I’ll give you a little insight into me, a little look into the mind of this father to be.

So I turn to my left, I turn to my right, I put one arm up in the air, I follow with another arm in the air, and then I scream, “YES, MY PENIS WORKS!” I knew my penis worked for the other things like jerking off, sex, peeing, light sabers, pointing, poking things, slapping things, puppetry, microphone, and hang and dry clothes. But the ultimate question is, does my penis impregnate? YOU BET YOUR ASS IT DOES! It was a joyous moment for me. “I AM MAN!” I sat there thinking to myself: *every part of me works*. I thought about shaking my penis’s hand but I didn’t have time for that, so congratulations to me

Then Oprah chimes in for that “aha moment” or what I call an “OH SHIT MOMENT.” We are having a baby!

Am I ready for this? Should I be ready to raise a kid? I’m scared to death, but I have this awesome thing, a baby! What the hell was I thinking? I know sex without a condom is so much better, but seriously y’all, if you’re not ready for this craziness, then throw a rubber on your jimmy, honest to God.

Okay? Are you all with me?

You all are going to sit there and ask yourselves, *How am I going to do this? Can I do this? Should I do this? How in the hell am I going to do this? Why am I doing this?* Then you stop asking yourself questions and then you pray: “Please God, please wonderful beautiful merciful Jewish God, or Christian God, or Allah or Baby Jesus, if Ricky Bobby was around. Please let this kid look like his mother.”

Now when you start telling people that you are pregnant, they are going to ask you a few questions: “Oh, you are pregnant. What are you having?” “Oh, what’s his or her name?” Immediately, these questions are asked, along with am I going to have a boy or a girl?

I am the youngest of three boys. My parents are still married, and my mother has a brother who has two boys, and they have a kid, another boy. Oh, and my brother has a kid and he’s a boy. Since we are getting into my family tree, my dad also has a brother...are you getting what I am laying out in front of you.

People always ask me, “Are you going to find out the sex of your baby?” I tell them, “Of course.” Then they say, “Are you sure you want to do that? It’s the last surprise you will ever get to have.”

Well, if I find out at 16 weeks or 40 weeks, it’s still not going to be much of a surprise. In this family, we have boys! That’s what I am getting, and that’s what the thing in my wife’s belly is going to be. It’s a boy, which is not very surprising. Side-note, how many of you have ever seen an ultrasound? Well, the cute thing in your wife is not a baby...it’s an alien! I think ultrasound techs are some of the biggest liars in the world. They say, “Oh, look how cute your baby is!” It’s not cute. It’s a blob or an alien and besides you can’t see the damn thing anyways. I love it when they say to me, “Oh can you see it?” “Oh my, there, right there, can you see his or her leg?” “Oh wow, and there’s a foot!” Now I know they are lying because they don’t know if that’s the hand or the foot, but it’s our baby and we can’t always say what we think. We simply agree, “Oh yes, I see it, how adorable.” It’s a fucking ALIEN!

I walked up to my brother, the one who already has a boy, and I said, “Well, guess what? You are going to be an uncle.”

He hugs me, congratulates me, and asks me if we are going to find out the sex... all those annoying questions. He then proceeds to tell me what we are having.

He says, “I will bet you anything it’s a girl.” I say, “Oh yeah, sure, of course you know.” He then proceeds to tell me why we are having a girl. Are you ready for this, he says, “Jeff, you are going to have a girl because you like musicals.” I have to tell you this with a straight face because he was dead serious. He thinks back to when I was a kid and I used to listen to musicals. Okay, not just when I was a kid. So because I like musicals, I am going to have a baby girl! I told him he might be right. I said, “We are either going to have a baby girl or a flaming little boy!” He didn’t get the joke because he was so serious about us having a girl.

Well, the day finally came when we could find out the sex of our child. We decided to do a cake reveal—one of those cake things where the entire inside of the cake is either pink or blue. You can do cupcakes and each one of them are pink and blue, and whatever you have more of is what you are going to have, but I don’t trust my friends or family enough to allow them to count. My friends will grab four of them and toss them in their mouth and not tell anyone, and then I am stuck without a clue. Anyways, we are doing the cake thing. I take the sealed envelope to the bakers and let them see it so they can know what color to make the cake. A day goes by and then we have all of my family over to cut the cake. My wife grabs the knife, cuts into the thing, flips it over and the thing is pink, so pink it’s Pepto Bismol. I’m in shock, I can’t believe it! Then what do I hear coming from the other side of the room? (*In my brother’s know-it-all voice*) “I told you, Les Miz, I told you it was going to be a girl!” Now my dick of a brother is walking around telling everyone how he knew it, how he called it. The worst part about all of this is I can’t prove that asshole wrong.

I call my buddy who was at the top of his class at NYU, a third-world trained doctor, cream of the crop, smart as shit type of guy. I call him and I say, “I need you to look at the ultrasound pic. How in the world do you know it’s a girl?” He tells me to send a pic of the pic and I do, and then he calls me back and says, “Yup, it’s for sure a girl!” HOW DO YOU KNOW? He tells me this tidbit of

information, which he went to school to learn. A lot of school, but that's not the point, as he says, "It's a girl because there is no penis there!"

So now I am going to be a father of a baby girl. Again I pray, "Please lord, don't let this little girl look like me; let her have hair on her head!" That's something that I am sitting here waiting for. In fact, the same dick of a brother has a bet with my dad that the little girl is going to come out with more hair on her head than me. This time, I hoping he is right! Wow, a little girl. I don't have a clue what to do with a little girl. I mean I grew up with all boys and all of my friends were boys, and then my brother shouts out again, "Take her to a musical!"

Don't let this kid be the jackass I was when I was growing up. Your life flashes before your eyes and then you question every dumb decision that you have ever made in your entire life. Things that you haven't thought about in your life come up and haunt you.

What do little girls do? I hope they don't do all the things that my friends and I did. People like my mother tell me, "You will be great with girls because of some of the femmy thing you did as a kid." Girls are different than guys, am I right? They don't go running around and knocking each other in their tits, do they? I, to this day, have no idea why nut shots happen. It hurts like hell when it's done to you, and there is no real reason why I should do it to someone else. My mother was a great mom and she put up with a lot of crap, and I am also sure she enjoyed laughing at us. I keep coming back to this idea that what happens if my kid is bald like me? Then I think to myself: *No way that can happen as she hadn't done all the stupid things I did.*

I want you all to close your eyes for a second; okay, you got them closed? Now I want you to picture me with a big old head of hair—you got that image? Now I want you to imagine me with that hair and maybe some frosted tips, maybe a little sun in. Stop thinking about the musicals, damn it.

I've got playing with my daughter's hair down; just don't let her use sun in! When I was kid, I went through life wondering when I was going to hit puberty. Do girls do that? When am I going to get some hair on my face or under my armpits? Ladies, all guys go through this phase! I just have no clue if females think the same way. When I was in college, my wish more than came true, and puberty threw up on my back and I had hair everywhere—front back, over under, up down—you name it and I have it.

Now one of my best friends and I decided that we should take care of our back hair and be nice and smooth for the ladies. We tried wax, Nair, epil stop spray, shaving—you name it, we tried it. But the worst one of all was Nads. Now with a name like that, how could we not try it? Causing pain to my friends was just what we did. Nads is a no-heat wax system, so it seems like a good idea right? Wrong, when it's not heated up. It's this thick, gooey, gross substance. It's like putting caramel or gum in your hair, and that hurts like a mother! Now after you have put knots of hair into your back, then you get the joy of putting a strip on there, letting it sit for a second, and then ripping that SOB right off.

Now this Nads' process hurt so much when it was done to you. I am an emotional guy and I will cry at a sad movie or loss of a loved one, but this time I was crying for a different reason. Pain from beauty! It was so damn funny when you got to do it to the other guy, so I guess that's why we kept going. We decided only one strip at a time. So basically the only way we got through the pain was having that little break and the knowledge that we get to give it right back.

Now all of this is going on in my folks' house while my mother is watching. I am, as I said, the youngest of three boys, and I am imagining my mom thinking, *Well I guess I didn't get my girl, but this is close enough* because she is watching in tears of joy, wondering why her son is waxing the shit out of his back, but she didn't care as my pain was her entertainment. She loved it so much that she even asked to pull one of the strips off so she could cause some pain as well. I mean it was her house, so I let her do my friend's back.

Then I had another one of my best friends come over and he was late to the party. He doesn't have any back hair, but he felt left out from the ridiculousness. He needed to see what the fuss was all about, so he said, "Hey let's try it on my chest." I more than gladly agreed to do this. I lathered my Nads on my friend's chest, and what? I lathered the stuff on my buddy chest and knots of hair were beginning to form. I went ahead and put the strip on him, waited a second, and then I let her rip. It was done the same way as we had been doing for the past 20 minutes only this time blood just starts gushing out from his chest. My mother was not scared that someone was bleeding in her house; instead, she ran and grabbed her camera because she never wanted to forget this moment.

So I guess with all the femmy things I did, being able to raise a girl isn't going to be all that tough. After using all of these products, I may end up being more of a lady than my daughter!

Now on May 14, my world changed as I witnessed the birth of my daughter—the most beautiful thing you can ever be a part of. The birth of your child is a gift from God.

You walk into the hospital and one of the first questions that you are asked is, "Do you have a birthing plan?" This is asked during a high-pressure situation, and my wife is breathing heavy and is in pain and I am nervous so I said, "Our plan is to have this baby and keep it." The nurse just stared at me. Then she asked, "Are you the father of this kid? Now I am sure they ask this to everyone when they come in, but after her giving me a dirty look I said, "Nope. I'm just here for the show?"

Everyone asks if you are you going to be in the room. Well, let's put it this way. I had box seats and I can never look at my wife the same again. "The birth of *your* child is beautiful!" "The birth of *your* child is beautiful!" "The birth of *your* child is beautiful!" If I keep saying this over and over again, then I will believe it. "The birth of *your* child is beautiful."

It's fucking disgusting. No, it's amazing and it's disgusting. It's so beautiful in a bloody vagina sort of way. I like to think that it is God's sick joke to let people watch the most beautiful thing on earth. God must really like horror movies. Most people, if you ask them, will say, "It was the most beautiful thing I have ever witnessed." Here is the typical male response: "Well, I mean it was the birth of my kid, so it was beautiful." I am here to tell you, ladies, that we witnessed something we don't want to talk about, so we just have that response at a safe backup mechanism. If we say anything other than our generated response, then our wives will kick us in the dicks on a repeat effort. They have every right to do this because they pushed a living thing out of a small hole. God is a woman and lets them go through that much pain—nope, sorry about that. Anyways....

People ask me all the time about being a parent? I'm supposed to say, "It's a gift and I love my child more than anything in the world." I don't even know the kid yet. I may be the first person to say this out loud, but I don't think I like this kid. She can't do anything, except keep my ass up at night. Also, I have no idea if my kid likes me, so why do I need to do the same. She hasn't told me that she loves me yet. I say it to her and she doesn't respond, which makes me think she may hate me, but again I don't know the reason because she can't talk.

"Don't you love being a dad?"

"Yes, I love not going to the movies whenever I want. I love watching my favorite football team score a game winning touchdown in complete silence. (Perform action). Now I'm not going to kill my kid, as that's illegal. But why can't she just shut the fuck up while daddy watches his team?"

What was really interesting to me about writing my material was I had all of that research and I knew what I wanted to say so I just started writing. I had to ask my wife for permission to write down a lot of the personal things for the bits, but she was okay with it. With all of the acting training that I had received, I knew delivery and performance were not going to be an issue. I knew I could trust in

my training that I would be able to get up onstage and tell a good story. I just needed to look at what I had written as a gigantic monologue. I found when writing my material that it simply wasn't working. I would sit down with my laptop and stare at the screen, but would not be able to type out what I wanted to say. I was having a writer's block before I even started. I needed a place to start and used my self-deprecation to get that out of the way. I started typing my material and read it back to myself, but for some reason, it didn't sound right. It didn't sound like something I would say. I read it out loud to my wife and she kept telling me it sounds like a paper, not a dialogue. I then thought to myself *why don't I try saying it, and then writing it?* It was much better for me to speak into a tape recorder and then go back and type it out. A classmate of mine told me about Dragon dictation, and that is what really got the ball rolling for me. Dragon dictation allows the writer to speak his script into a microphone and then the program types it. I figured out how to use it, and soon I was writing my routine faster than I had ever imagined. I read my first few pages and the script was beginning to sound like dialogue. It only took three days to put my material on paper. I began practicing my routine and found it very easy to memorize the script because it was in my own words. Each page read about two minutes long so I knew that if I started from the beginning with the introduction and self deprecation jokes, I could go on for another page or two and that would be my set.



## CHAPTER 4: THE PERFORMANCE/CONCLUSION

The life of a stand-up comedian is not a life I ever planned on living. In acting, we talk about vulnerability, and to me there is nothing more vulnerable than writing your own material and stepping on stage and hoping that people are buying what you are selling. I have all of this material written and I need to figure out what to do with it. I was lucky enough to work for a comedy club when I was living in New York, so I got to see first-hand what people have to go through to even get a little bit of stage time.

While I was working, I would see comedians walking into the clubs in the middle of the day to drop off a DVD or a resume in the hope of getting a chance to be on stage. Most of the books I had read about stand-up said the only way to get onstage is to do an open mic at the club and hope that someone who books for that club is watching you and likes you.

I have always been a go-getter, so I decided to try something a little bit different. I hit the pavement and went and visited a few of the different clubs and even sat in on a few open mic nights. I never got up to perform anything because the two that I went to asked the people who were getting onstage to pay. I couldn't believe that: These people are putting themselves out there and praying that they are the next Bill Cosby, but now they have to pay to perform at an open mic night?

After watching a few different sets of people, I was starting to gain some confidence. One thing I kept noticing about most of them was their lack of ability to take the stage. In graduate school, we talked a lot about connecting our breath to the script, and these comics were a great example of not connecting. They were all over the place when it came to delivery. The training that I received in school allowed me to connect my breath and to let the audience connect with me. As actors, we need to be able to gain control of a scene. I was watching

someone trying really hard to be funny and, as an audience member, I watched him trying instead of just doing.

Meisner talks all the time about being in the moment, and most of these performers were not in it. They needed to trust the material they had written and go with it. As an actor, there are many times we are given shows or scenes or scripts that we don't particularly care for, but it's our job to believe in it and make the audience believe in it. So watching comics get up on stage and then say, "Well, this probably isn't funny" guarantees it's not going to be funny.

A few of the comics who were at this open mic night had zero stage presence. They were struggling to even hold the microphone properly, and one of them didn't even use the microphone. He was up onstage and said, "I hate microphones, so I am going to do my set without one." I wasn't sure if he was trying to be different or he really didn't know how to handle himself on stage.

While watching them perform, I found myself stereotyping them. The open mic crowd is such a tough atmosphere because you have a room filled with a bunch of wannabe comics who are worrying about their own material and not really listening to each other. One major thing I took away from the open mic nights is that with my acting training I can play a character and play a room much better than a lot of these guys who were simply trying too hard. I have been on stage countless times and some of these guys have never performed before. That is one thing that I saw a lot of in the comedy world: many people have never been on a stage. While watching, I was finding myself focusing on their delivery more than the material itself. I decided to not perform at any open mic nights and wanted to get onstage right away at a club.

I had lived in New York previously and wasn't afraid to walk right into these clubs and pitch myself. So that was how I was going to get onstage. If there is one thing I learned about

stand-up, it's that each club wants to be able to promote its show with names in it. If the club doesn't have any comics with names, then the next best thing is credits. I didn't have a DVD of me performing, but I did have my acting resume, and that was my major in! I wasn't Jeff Nathan the stand-up comic, I was now Jeff Nathan from *30 Rock*, or Jeff Nathan from *ABC's What Would You Do?*

Without even hearing any of my material, Ha Comedy Club was happy enough to use my credits on its shows. They found the celebrity in me, or lack thereof, to be more important than the material I had put together. Now I am not sure how many people have been through Times Square and have been bothered by people demanding that they come to the best comedy show or best comedy club in town. My credits, no matter how big or how small, gave the guys on the street the ability to promote the show featuring a guy from shows that people had heard of.

Ha Comedy Club was one of the largest comedy clubs in New York City. It was a grungy place in the basement of the Actors Equity Building. I was being asked to do my first paid show, and I hadn't even told a joke yet. My acting resume has some improv on it, so this told the booker that I would be able to host the shows. The way Ha Comedy Club worked was for the shows to be one hour long, with five comics. Getting up onstage and introducing myself to the audience and finding out where they were from, making a few people laugh at little witty one-liners was nothing new to me. The improv troupe that I performed with asked me to host the shows as well. I was getting good at it, or at least I thought I was getting good at it. What was very interesting to me is that because I was a host, I wasn't judged as much as the other comics. I didn't feel obligated to get up there and self-deprecate. I was asked to host four nights the first week I was up in NYC. Each night, there were two different rooms, with about 100 people in each room, and each room would have four shows a night. Within my first week, I was hosting

three shows a night. The owner of the club came up to me and said, “Are you ever going to do any of your own material?” I didn’t really understand what he was talking about. I didn’t think I was really allowed to do that because I thought my job was to get to know the audience, and then simply introduce the rest of the comics and maybe make a joke here or there.

Anthony, the owner, was telling me the trick to being a great host was the ability to do all of the things I was doing but also to include parts of my set while hosting the show. This was tricky for me because I had written 30 minutes of material, and I didn’t know what jokes to tell.

So the next week when I was asked to come back and host a night, I was determined while hosting to tell one of the jokes I had written. I got up and introduced myself, asked people where they were from, and then decided to talk about becoming a father, which is what most of my material is about. I only had about four minutes after I was introduced, so I tried to throw a joke in and it failed. This, to me, became less about the storytelling, and more about making jokes. The improviser in me says *screw this I will read the audience and make a witty comment to them and save myself the embarrassment*. It was a success when it comes to the hosting aspect of stand-up, but a failure at actually telling the audience something I had written. I had created what a lot of comics call fallback. Instead of actually trusting the material you write, you simply just do crowd work. On one of my nights off, I watched another comic host two different shows, and he found a way to manipulate his material into every show. It was a great learning experience for me. No matter who the crowd was or where they were from, he found a way to tie it back into his material. He had a set of questions to ask the audience besides where are you from? I was getting up onstage and introducing myself and then asked where people were from, instead of asking the question: “Do we have any new parents out there?” The next time I

attempted hosting, it went a lot better. As dumb as this sounds, I didn't put things together as to how to work my material in. Practice would be the only way I would ever get better at hosting.

After a week of hosting, I finally asked the owner if I could change it up for a show and get some stage time. He agreed to let me do the 7:30 show. What is interesting about this particular show is that it was one of two family friendly shows. That doesn't mean it's squeaky clean, but the expectations of the audience is that it won't be R rated. With the material I had written, I felt this was going to fit in very well. I was asked to go second in the lineup. It was a smaller crowd—about 65 people—but it was a perfect fit for me. This was the first time in a long time that I was actually nervous. I have been on stage hundreds of time, but this was the first time I was going to allow the audience to actually see me. Every other time, I had been on stage or on camera, I was playing a character, but my first time in stand-up I was going to be me.

I decided to watch the host get the show started. The guy who was hosting had done a few of the shows that I had hosted, so I had heard his material before, but he masterfully fit in a few of his jokes while making the audience feel like it was a conversation. So while I was getting myself prepared to get up on stage, I was learning something at the same time. The opener of the show set me up very well. Just like in improv, these shows are very important to set up for the rest of the comedians. I hit the stage and started with my material. This was one of the scariest things that I had ever done in my entire life.

Immediately, I did a little self-deprecation joke to warm them up, and it was a success. I started off introducing myself and letting them know that I was going to be a father, and I knew what they were thinking—I was too fat to be a dad, but bear with me, and I will tell you how it works. They laughed and I was ready to go. I continued on for the next seven minutes and saw the host flash his cell phone to let me know to wrap it up. It was almost like I had an out-of-

body experience. I couldn't believe that I was on stage for seven minutes, and I couldn't figure out what they were laughing at.

There are moments when you are on stage in a show when you aren't thinking about the lines you need to say or where you need to go next and everything just falls into place. I call that being in the zone. Athletes, actors, and even stand-up comedians have moments where everything is going right. I told the audience I had to get out of here, and they applauded.

I was now a stand-up comedian. I would love to tell you that I knew what specific jokes worked the best or why the audience was so into the show, but I can't—everything just worked. The manager came up to me and told my set was excellent. What a dream audience and what a dream experience for my first time on stage at a comedy club. I questioned myself and my idea of whether or not joke-telling or storytelling was going to work. I got up on stage, told a story, and made a lot of people laugh. The set went so well I was asked to come back the next day and do another set.

This time, I was going on in their bigger show, the 11:00 p.m. show. Broadway shows get out at around 10:15 to 10:30 and it's New York City, so people are looking to stay up and have a good time. I did the same routine and watched the host work his stuff, and then watched the opening act get up there and have a pretty good set.

It was my turn to get up there. I got up on stage and did my first joke—too fat to be a dad! It didn't land as well as the first night, but I wasn't going to stress. I had to keep telling myself that this isn't me telling jokes, I am simply telling a story and hoping that they begin to laugh at it. So as I started getting more into the stories, the crowd began to get into it with me. I noticed that if I physically used my body and gestures and moved around a lot more that they stayed with me. When I got to the bit about finding the pregnancy test, I acted it out and put

myself in the scenario for people to see. This type of performing felt bigger than life and worked for the audience. This show was not as successful as the first one for me, but the audience laughed and had a good time. This time, I remember working harder for jokes to land.

So I have now done two different shows and had two different outcomes. They were both positive outcomes, but still very different experiences. The first show was a younger, more family-oriented crowd, and they took to my stories very well. The second show was an older and a little bit rowdier a crowd. I didn't really change my approach to my performance and that could be what hurt me.

Earlier in my paper, I talked about the crowd stereotyping me, but I didn't do the same thing to them. I was able to perform with one of the same comedians both nights and I watched his set. He did the same material for both crowds, but in the latter one was cursed a little more. He also had a bit more of an aggressive approach towards the audience. Again, that actor training of people watching me was kicking in. Just by simply watching a comedian perform the same jokes to two completely different crowds, I was able to witness him stereotype the room and make changes on the fly. This is something that I am sure comes with plenty of practice and really trusting your material.

I was asked again to do another set the next day, and this time I was on the 11:30 show. I told myself to this time work the room a little and figure out what type of crowd I have. So I get into my bits and they aren't working. I was what people would call bombing onstage. Everything I said was boring to the audience. They legitimately did not care about anything I said. I was getting frustrated with this outcome, so I found myself this time on stage cursing a lot more, thinking that this would help. It felt like I was in a play that was under-rehearsed and didn't have enough time to tech the show.

I was up onstage for what felt like five hours, but it was only seven minutes. I was now doing what I had witnessed at the open microphone nights—I was trying way too hard. The crowd wasn't laughing at all and was starting to talk back to me. I see this now as a great learning experience, but at the time was horrifying. If I give up on my material and simply work the crowd too much then I am inviting them to talk a lot more.

This was also my first experience with hecklers. This late-night crowd had already had plenty of drinks in them, and if they didn't find something funny, they went ahead and told me. I had asked other comedians how they handle hecklers, and they all gave me different answers. I decided to ignore a heckler for as long as I could. He kept reminding the crowd how fat I was, and how small my cock was, and I just let it go. It was killing me to not go after the guy, but I was new to the club so I didn't want to do anything I wasn't supposed to do. I see the light from the host and quickly get off stage. This was one of the hardest things I had ever done. Do I ever want to do this again? I wasn't sure, until I saw the host get back up onstage and take it to the heckler. He went to town on this guy. Now this heckler was drinking a lot, so he was getting angrier and more belligerent. It got so rough from the comic and the audience member that the manager came in and kicked the guy out.

I am a huge sports fan, so I would say that I am now batting 2-3, but that swing and a miss was so bad I didn't know if I wanted to get up and do it again. Anthony, the owner of the club, told me to shake it off and that he would love to have me again tomorrow. I went home and debated the entire time whether I wanted to put myself through this again. I told myself next time, just stick with the material you have written and do not over work the crowd—that is what the host is suppose to do.



A new day and a new show. I was put on the 11:30 show again and was scared to death. This time, I was opening the show. I got up onstage and introduced myself and said my jokes and heard some chuckles. It wasn't a failure, so I needed to keep the energy going and keep the stories going. I luckily didn't have a heckler at this show, but I still wasn't getting the laughs that I thought I was going to get. It was almost like they didn't want me to even be there.

I got the light from the host and got off stage for what was, once again not a funny show. *Was it my material? Is it me that they don't like? Maybe it's just a tough crowd.*

The next comic got up onstage and got into his material and they loved him. His material was beyond filthy. Everything he said had them eating out of the palm of his hand: curse words flying, sexual references, even a few rape jokes, and they loved it. This was very interesting to me because it wasn't my material. I think it's the audience's expectations. It's a late-night show and they are drinking and they want to hear things that shock them or surprise them. That is not the type of comic I will ever be. I was asked to do the late-night show the next day, and I asked if it would be all right if I could just stay on the early family friendly show. He agreed and I had another wonderful experience. Show after show, I was seeing the material I had written fly off the page and made people laugh. All in all, I was able to perform for the club for three full weeks using my material.

I set out with the question: Can I be a successful stand-up comedian? I looked at joke theory, which allowed me to focus on the material. I also researched and watched comedians of all different styles and character types. These comedians differed in material and delivery style. Looking at the history of stand-up, it was important for me to take notice that this is still a new style of theatre. It is constantly changing, and comics are doing everything they can to break into

the business. If you turn on your television right now, a lot of the main characters from the shows we watch have done stand-up.

So I ask the question: Is it better to be a joke-teller or a storyteller? It is best to do what works best for you! I have had the privilege to attend two different schools to train in acting and performance, and one major thing we learned is that truly diving into a role or project should be a very vulnerable thing. To be able to show your best self, you should use what you do well. If you know you are a good storyteller, then do that. If you have excellent control of your body while telling your jokes, use that. If you have a quick wit, or can do impressions, then you should be using that in your set.

This process has changed my life. Being funny at mom and dad's house is not even close to being funny onstage with a paying audience. I received a phone call a few months after doing my last set and was asked if I wanted to come back and do it again. I quickly thanked them for the opportunity and then told them, *no!*

The lifestyle of a comic starting out in the game is a very tough one—trying as hard as you can to get spots in clubs, and those clubs are only going to pay you around 20 bucks a set. Unless you make a name for yourself and become a headliner, making a living is extremely hard to do. I compare my experience with comedy to auditioning. We, as actors, have to audition all the time to be able to continue our careers. We walk into a room with material that we have prepared, and we hope these people like us. If they like us, they will give us either a callback or possibly a job. If they don't like us they say, "thank you," and we walk out the door and move on and go to the next one. If they like us, they will laugh and people will have a good time. If they don't like you, it is almost impossible not to take it personally. They may hate the way you look, they may hate the way you talk, and they may hate the things you are trying to say. And

because of the lack of the fourth wall, they can and will give you immediate feedback. If they don't like you in a room where people are drinking and have paid to laugh, it can be very demeaning. If we don't get a callback, as actors we can chalk that up to a lot of things, but we don't have to be put down about the way we look or anything else. I am an actor who auditions a lot. The people behind the camera are no different than the audience at a comedy club. They want to see you do well and want to be entertained.

Through this process, I have gained the utmost respect for the craft of stand-up and learned a lot about myself as an artist. Before this, I had never performed anything I had written and thought that getting up onstage in a club would be easy: just be yourself and make them laugh. There are many ways to do stand-up comedy, and the approach that I used to dive into the comedy club scene may not be the only way to do it, but it did help me see what it takes to make people laugh. I have to be original and willing to risk failure in order to be successful.

Graduate school has given me confidence in writing and performing my material and has made me a more balanced actor. In the movement class, we played a lot with clowning, which helped me lockdown specific bits in my material. I was able to put myself in specific moments in my material, which gave my stand-up a sketch feel. The clowning was helpful in the section of my material when I found the pregnancy test. I could have held the microphone and said my material, but instead I allowed the audience to go through the experience with me. I let them step into the world by putting the mic back on the stand and acting the scene out. Physically, I literally stepped into my apartment on stage and allowed the audience to experience what I went through when I found out my wife and I were going to have a baby. My voice work has allowed me to be safe on stage. I used to have issues with getting in front of a crowd and talking and overdoing everything. I would find myself not being aware of my voice and hurting myself or

losing my voice as a result. When I would perform improv shows, I would not warm up properly or even think about my voice and that would cause me to have issues during the show. Realizing all of the different places sound can come from let me do more character voices for my parents and my brother.

I need to always be a student and to be willing and open to try things that scare me. Stand-up comedy was something in the back of my mind that frightened me, but with the training, I know I can tackle a lot of things that scare me in the arts. I hope to create and develop a one-man show, and with this as a starting point, I plan to add more characters and possibly even costumes to help tell this story. This process has challenged me to open myself up as an actor. I am now capable of creating my own work and do not have to rely on getting cast.

I am still going to be taking a few questions with me and hopefully will be able to answer them someday. Can I perform stand-up without being self-deprecating? Because the comedian is onstage and is going to be making fun of something or someone, does he have to make fun of himself first? How do I adjust my material to fit whatever crowd is watching the show, or should I have separate sets for separate crowds? I used to wonder why people were willing to take the risk of being a comic, and now I know that stand-up comedy is one way of breaking into the entertainment industry, but you have to be willing to give it your all when attempting this art form.

At this moment in my life, I know I do not want to do stand-up. It was a very humbling experience, and I learned a lot about myself. Getting up onstage with the material I wrote was terrifying. The amount of time and practice and revamping of my material are things that I am not ready to undertake. Comedians have to be willing to film themselves. They have to want to

watch their sets over and over again while picking out the little things that need work. They must be willing to fix the jokes that didn't work.

I personally can't think of a more vulnerable career than being a comedian. Every performance is a high-pressure situation with an audience that is in your face and constantly judging you. If you fail as a stand-up comedian, then you fail as a performer, a director, and a writer. That is a ton of pressure to put on oneself. Stand-up artists have to be willing to change their material constantly and fail at jokes in order to get better. Stand-up comedy gives the performer immediate feedback. Sometimes it can be great and sometimes it can be heartbreakingly mean.

I had never considered myself to be a nervous person, but performing my material made me nervous every time I touched the stage. It is a very lonely place on that stage, and it made me miss having a scene partner. Now don't get me wrong, as I loved the feeling of when one of my jokes landed or the thrill of making an audience laugh. Stand-up comedy is a career choice and you have to be willing to fully commit to the process. For me to continue with a career in this, I would have to be willing to put theatre on hold in order to focus on a career in stand-up. At this point in my life, that is not something I am willing to give up. I am proud that I took this journey and I know that I have grown as an artist. Ultimately, there were many highs and many lows in my little stand-up career. I may come back to it sometime down the road, but for now I will hide safely behind someone else's material. In conclusion, I want to say this, "My name is Jeff Nathan, and for a little while I was a paid professional Stand-up Comedian."

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