The Laugh-Makers

Stand-up Comedy as Art, Business, and Life-Style

ROBERT A. STEBBINS

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A Jeanne et Jean-Pierre Deslauriers

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Introduction

Although many Canadians have yet to attend their first live performance of stand-up comedy, few are unaware of its current popularity. The reminders are everywhere. Comics turn up regularly on the Johnny Carson and David Letterman shows. In the streets of our cities and on the grounds of our urban fairs, they entertain for whatever money can be coaxed from passersby. Bookstores and record shops package their humour in paper and vinyl, and newspapers and magazines scrutinize their professional lives. In 1989, a francophone radio station in Quebec was advertising the products of Burger King in the form of a stand-up comedy skit. Last but not least, people talk about comics frequently, at work, at home, and at play, mimicking their gestures and re-presenting their monologues in an attempt to experience the enjoyment of making people laugh.

This public madness about commercial humour is, of course, only part of our love affair with entertainment in general, which is at an all-time high in appeal and availability. The popularity of comedy is presently encouraging a growing proportion of devotees to enter the art itself. A line of work that consists of producing what one intensely enjoys is certainly attractive. Here is an occupation that is both fun and appreciated. Of course, there will come a time when the supply of comics and the demand for their services are equal and new performers will be discouraged by increased competition and diminished opportunity. But for now, in both Canada and the United States, the need for comics is still on the upswing. And so is the desire to enter stand-up comedy as a vocation or avocation.

Still, seeking lifetime work in show business is a rough road to travel. Many start down it motivated by unrealistic dreams

of stardom, money, and a job relished because it is what they enjoy most. Glamour, life-style, monetary reward, and certainly the art itself, separately or in some combination, lure the aspiring performer to try a hand at commercial entertainment. But only a few succeed and even fewer become major stars.

This book is about the drive to become somebody in the field of stand-up comedy. It examines the entertainment careers of Canadian amateurs and professionals from a sociological perspective. It reports on their way of life and their hopes and fears and successes and failures. It looks at life onstage as well as life behind the scenes in hotel rooms and green rooms. It also addresses the subject of comics' sometimes brittle, sometimes warm relations with managers, agents, other comics, spouses, friends, and parents. Although most worthy of study, I do not delve deeply into the issue of humour and stand-up as approached, say, from the perspective of phenomenology, semiology, or critical theory. To do justice to this subject would require another and rather different book.

Seventy-two men and women were formally interviewed for this study in 1987. Fifty-seven of them, including nine women, were practising stand-up comics, selected more or less equally from the ranks of amateurs and professionals living in the central and western regions of Canada. Three of the thirty-one professional respondents were francophone, the rest anglophone. Four American pro- fessionals were interviewed while performing in Canada. Of the remaining twenty-four professionals, half were booked through the Yuk Yuk's chain of comedy clubs, half were booked through other agents. Twenty-six amateurs were interviewed.

Additionally, systematic observation was made of comedy clubs in Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Windsor, Hamilton, Toronto, Montreal, and Halifax, and of several "satellite rooms" in and around these centres. This entailed watching one and sometimes two shows in the course of an evening, as well as talking to performers before and after they went onstage. All told, I observed around 140 amateurs and professionals perform from mid-February 1987 through July 1988. On occasion I would talk with comics after hours – about the show that evening, about the business of comedy, and about their life-style. I also observed some comics during the day when they were not working, but mostly I learned about their leisure time through interviews and informal conversations.

The remaining fifteen formal interviews were undertaken with a miscellaneous sample of club managers and owners, booking

agents, show organizers, and personal managers. Informal discussions about career and life-style were held with perhaps another twenty comics in such places as bars, green rooms, hotel rooms, late-night restaurants, and "comedy condominiums." Added to this component of the study was a large diet of televised comedy. And as comics themselves are wont to do I watched David Letterman and Johnny Carson, whose television talk shows frequently feature comics as guests.

Most of my time before the television, however, was devoted to French comedy, principally the regular productions of Radio-Canada's 1987–88 season: Samedi de rire, L'Autobus de showbusiness, and Les Beaux dimanches. These programs helped me make up for the shortfall of only three direct interviews with francophone performers, some informal discussion, and five live French shows – enough so, at least, that I was able to discuss the comedy scene in Quebec in some detail. To earn a living professional francophone comics in Quebec must tour a great deal of the time, and it was difficult for me to drop into Montreal for ten days and find an adequate interview sample, as I did in other cities. Amateurs, for reasons given in chapter 4, were next to impossible to locate. As a result of all this, my knowledge of the personal lives of francophone comics is much weaker than that of their anglophone counterparts. This problem will be acknowledged at the appropriate places in the text.

Finally, I attempted through the use of library resources and interviews with club owners, managers, booking agents, and show organizers to develop a history of American and Canadian stand-up comedy. The Canadian history, which did not begin formally until 1974, cannot be meaningfully presented in isolation. It grew out of and is still affected by American stand-up. Thus we must look far into the past and outside our borders to see how Canadian stand-up was set in motion.

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CHAPTER ONE

An Art Is Born

I stood at the motel desk waiting to check out after ten days of observing and interviewing comics in Vancouver. The proprietor of the place was fascinated with my project. He had learned about it upon my arrival, when I had to justify my request for a quiet room and afternoon maid service. "Well, did you learn any good jokes?" he inquired hopefully. I said I had, but I thought to myself that that was far from accurate. "You should certainly be the life of the party from now on," he pressed. Clearly, his conception of stand-up comedy and mine were not the same.

Stand-up comedy is the art, initially developed in the United States, of humourous dialogue presented before an audience. The talk itself is memorized and, today, usually expressed in a spontaneous conversational manner, as if the performer were speaking to friends. Although it tends to be one-sided, there may be interaction between performer and audience, which the former does not always want. Often verbal content is augmented with a range of theatrical embellishments such as special costumes and props, grunts, snorts, and howls, bodily movements and facial gestures. The typical act consists of anecdotes, narrative jokes, one-liners, and short descriptive monologues, which may or may not be related.

Today it is widely acknowledged among comics that the best of them write some or all of their material, fitting it to their personalities or, less commonly, their stage personas. Original presentations are more personal and direct, more unrestrained, than scripted presentations and material impersonating a social type or public figure. This creates a market for one-person performances; duos or trios exist but are rare, possibly because conversational quality and personal expression suffer when two

or more people try to coordinate their efforts on stage. As the comedy team strives to find a common denominator, their lines sound more and more scripted.

Verbal content is the essence of stand-up comedy. Other stock-in-trade aspects of legitimate theatre – notably costumes, scenery, and make-up – are either avoided or considered minor (Mintz 1985, 71). Although stand-up comedy was originally presented only to live audiences, later it became available over radio and still later on television and long-playing records. Most recently comics have been selling their humour on video tape.

The foregoing might be considered a narrow scientific definition, which we shall refer to as *pure stand-up comedy.* In show business and everyday life, however, the art is less precisely defined. Some male comics blithely define themselves as entertainers who "grab their crotch" while on stage. Since show business usage bears on this study in many ways, let us establish here and now some terminological distinctions that will help bridge the gap between the vocabularies of science and entertainment.

Strictly speaking, stand-up comedy in its pure form is a type of *variety comedy,* which is, in turn, one area of the variety arts. There are variety arts that are entertaining but not humourous, such as dance routines and feats of skill. Though it has clowns, the circus, a series of variety acts, is not a particularly humourous form of entertainment.

The types of variety comedy that can be classed as *quasi-stand-up comedy* resemble pure stand-up in being primarily verbal. The ethical monologue is one. It is the closest cousin of pure stand-up, and the two are sometimes difficult to distinguish. It consists of a lengthy, coherent treatment of a single subject that packs a message of some kind, and can be contrasted with the shorter, more disconnected jokes, anecdotes, one-liners, and descriptive monologues of the typical comic of the 1980s. Closely related to the ethical monologue is storytelling, long yarns and anecdotes, each with an identifiable plot. Then there is satire, a monologue the aim of which is to ridicule some person or practice through irony and sarcasm. There are also impersonations of particular individuals or types of individuals, which become parodies when the aim is to satirize or caricature. These five forms are considered stand-up comedy in the entertainment world. Still, they differ from the pure form of stand-up in structure and content.

Somewhat more removed are the types of *mixed stand-up*

comedy, which combine verbal and physical humour. In prop comedy the performer brings one or more important accessories to the stage. Here we have juggling, music, ventriloquism, and entertainment magic (not mentalism). In two other forms, singing and sound effects, the voice figures prominently. Sound effects are typically produced in various ways through a microphone and can make use of special noise-making accessories. Finally, there is pantomime and clowning. Whereas verbal content is minimal here, other properties of stand-up comedy are fully employed, especially bodily and facial gestures. Heavy reliance on props and costumes distinguishes these latter two arts from pure stand-up comedy.

The fourth division of variety comedy is *team comedy.* As the history of stand-up demonstrates, sketch and improvisational groups have played an important role in the development of variety comedy since the last half of the nineteenth century. Sketch comedy differs from pure stand-up chiefly in the minimal freedom the actor has to deviate from the script and to interact with the audience; he or she plays an impersonal role. Sketches also have plots of some sort – seldom complex – which are largely absent in stand-up comedy. Sketch players also rely heavily on props, costumes, scenery, and make-up.

Improvisation falls at the opposite end of the continuum: there is no script, which means all action must be created on the spot.[1] According to my observations, improvisation attempts to develop a plot, within the limits of spontaneous creation. But it is a collective effort: each player must blend his or her actions with those of the others onstage. Here premeditated conversation and audience interaction are out of the question.

One final observation: Quasi-stand-up, mixed stand-up, and team comedy all have counterparts on the nonhumourous side of the variety arts; pure stand-up does not. Perhaps this will eventually change. It is after all the youngest of all the comic forms considered here and, in many ways, an offshoot of a number of them. According to *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (9th ed.), the term *stand-up comedy* originated as recently as 1966. The form's precursors are much older.

PRECURSORS

To be verbally humourous, on or off the stage, requires a certain mastery of language and movement. The comic's verbal and theatrical expression must be unique, unlike the expression of

ordinary people when they talk about the same things. Otherwise the presentation would be too routine and lacking in humour. Verbal comedy also requires exceptional language ability and a receptive audience, one that sees the comedian's conception and verbal presentation as ludicrous.

From all this it is possible to conclude, as we search for the roots of stand-up comedy, that it does not deserve the title of the world's second oldest profession, a claim occasionally made by modern comics. Activities noticeably less dependent on verbal skills such as prostitution (the oldest profession) and magic have probably been around longer. Magic, which exploits physical and psychological anomalies (Truzzi 1974, 245–6), does not require verbal sophistication on the part of observers. While today's magicians often patter to set up and draw attention to their tricks, the latter themselves are the centre of attention (Stebbins 1984, 51–2). Magicians may say little or nothing onstage.[2]

It is plausible that stand-up comedy only took root in verbally sophisticated societies, evolved from earlier societies whose communication was largely physical and pictorial. Perhaps ancient Greece was the first society where a verbal precondition for stand-up existed. At any rate the modern theatrical monologue got its start in the prologues players presented in certain Greek dramas (*Grand Dictionnaire Encyclopédique Larousse* 1984, 7055, 8503). Here an individual performer spoke to the audience to warm them up and set the scene for the play that followed.

Prologues are no longer part of legitimate theatre. By the Middle Ages they had evolved into satirical monologues spoken as unintegrated asides during longer theatrical pieces. By the eighteenth century they were part of popular full-length entertainments presented by one person. The juggler was apparently instrumental in this transition, for he learned to embellish his act with the stories and ballads of the troubadour. The eighteenth-century entertainer was a true variety artist, offering a combination of magic, juggling, dancing, miming, singing, and humourous monologues. And at about this time the French *chansonnier* emerged as a composer and performer of witty songs, monologues and skits, which frequently contained satirical or erotic material.

All these entertainers spoke to and for the common people. They presented familiar ideas, situations, and stories in language the people could understand and from points of view with which they could identify. In taking the people's view, entertainers

sometimes challenged established society and sometimes got in trouble for doing so. The modern comic is not always so iconoclastic, but within stand-up there exists a tradition of ridiculing moral, social, and political conventions. Many a club comic stands outside these conventions; he or she analyzes them, pokes fun at them, questions them in ways that amuse audiences. Such comics are, as Mintz (1985, 75–6) and Kosiski (1984) put it, spokespersons and anthropologists for contemporary society. It is no wonder that comedy club audiences are generally young, under age thirty-five. They have the least to lose and the most to gain by identifying with such humour.[3]

PHASE 1: THE BEGINNING

If one person were singled out as the first stand-up comic, according to the broad definition of show business, it would have to be Mark Twain (Gribben 1985, 48). For approximately fifty years, starting in 1856 with an after-dinner speech, he toured the United States as a "humorous lecturer" (Fatout 1960, 23).[4] In this role he delivered monologues of various lengths on numerous subjects, may of which were treated not only with wit but also with satire. Twain would lounge onstage, drawling out tall tales and anecdotes, pausing skilfully while his audience roared with laughter at certain passages. He had, for those days, a unique lecturing style.

In the 1870s vaudeville, or the variety show, emerged in the United States as a form of stage entertainment freer than the fully scripted Broadway show (Franklin 1979, 17).[5] One of the most popular vaudeville monologuists was Will Rogers who, wittingly or unwittingly, was an artistic descendant of Twain and other earlier American humourists (Alworth 1974, 95). Rogers may have been the first stand-up comic to engage in those witty and sometimes teasing exchanges so frequently used by contemporary performers. He may also have been one of the first to organize his act around an identifiable and appealing "hook" – a special talent, social role, or physical feature used to the performer's advantage in eliciting laughs. Rogers's was rope twirling.

Neither Twain nor Rogers was a pure stand-up comic. Rogers was a mixed stand-up comic of the prop variety. Twain worked outside vaudeville as a monologuist in quasi-stand-up comedy; he was considered a lecturer who was often funny, not an entertainer. The first pure stand-up comic was probably Charlie

Case who, during the 1880s and 1890s, was telling jokes and funny stories onstage without props, a highly unusual practice at the time (Martin and Segrave 1986, 29). The first woman stand-up comic of whom we have any record was Beatrice Herford, also a monologuist. She presented her first monologue in London, England, in 1895 (Martin and Segrave 1986, 35).

PHASE 2: THE CONCERT ACT

Vaudeville, usually staged in large theatres and civic auditoriums, faded from the scene in the early 1930s. This coincided with the rise of two new venues for stand-up comedy and other acts: nightclubs, and the "Borscht Belt" of Catskill Mountains resort hotels near New York City. These places did not offer variety shows. A comic or some other single performer would present an entire show, possibly all the shows, on a given evening. He or she presented what today's comics call a concert, and sometimes did so for several successive nights.

The Borscht Belt hotels catered chiefly to Jewish people from New York, a clientele that gave young comics valuable experience as "toomlers" or "tumult makers." The hotels were regarded by those in the entertainment industry as places where a comic paid his or her dues, doing work disagreeable enough to be abandoned as soon as something better came along. Joan Rivers (1986, 304) commented that "the Catskills hotel audiences were – and still are – the worst in the world." Yet even the Borscht Belt rooms demanded some polish. To get it, amateur comics needed places where they could fashion their act to a minimally acceptable standard, then showcase it for someone who would (it was hoped) hire them, almost always for a pittance. Until the early 1960s, such breeding grounds were rare indeed.

The entertainment bill was similar in nightclubs and in large urban hotels. Different forms of variety entertainment including stand-up were available on different evenings. But unlike the Borscht Belt hotels, these places booked only the most polished acts. Nightclubs have never been outlets for entertainers to learn and practice the basics of their art.

Nightclub dates were given to the old vaudevillians and to younger performers of the same orientation. Their entertainment was, among other things, quick paced, to the point, and pure fun (no messages). In stand-up comedy, this meant short jokes, wisecracks, and one-liners.[6] Henny Youngman earned the reputation of being the king of one-liners. Bob Hope has always

relied on them. The criterion of shortness, incidentally, appears to have discouraged the expression of personality so popular today. The tendency was either to buy material from a gag writer or to steal it from another comic. Milton Berle's unsavoury reputation for the latter won him the nickname Thief of Badgag.

Other outlets for stand-up comedy during this period, roughly 1930 to 1960, included radio and the entertainment revue. In fact, sporadic broadcasts of radio stand-up date back to the 1920s; they continued until television provided an alternative in the 1950s. Radio comedy shows and the stand-up portion of entertainment reviews were played only by the best in the business and seldom afforded a regular income. And midway between the aspiring amateur and high-ranking professional was the burlesque or strip comic. He, and occasionally she, worked as an emcee in burlesque shows (which disappeared in the 1950s) and striptease bars. The latter are still in operation, but most do not use the services of stand-up comics.

PHASE 3: AMATEUR EXPERIMENTATION

Younger, less established performers had little interest in becoming "line comics." The times were changing. These "new wave" comics (*Playboy* 1961) wanted to develop their own material in longer and more connected units. From the late 1950s to the early 1970s – the life-span of new wave comedy – America was beset with political tension. The public mind was forced to consider such issues as official corruption, racial inequality, police violence, and foreign war. All forms for humour that addressed these subjects were timely. To be sure, they were sometimes addressed with one-liners, but the monologue, often satirical, enabled a more thorough examination. This was the approach of Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl, among the few comics of their type to achieve professional status in this era.

This was also a time when the public wanted to know more about entertainers. An entertainer was bound to reveal something about his or her outlook when taking on the emotional, moral and political issues of the day. But the public wanted more. It was attracted to performers who treated the problems and experiences of everyday life – sex, money, failure, relationships, the bureaucracy. Self-revelation and self-deprecation gave the audience a sense of intimacy and involvement with the performer unknown in the days of wisecracking, line-buying (or -stealing)

comics. The conversational element was now becoming more prominent in stand-up comedy.

The place where this new style took root was the coffeehouse. Coffeehouses emerged in the 1940s in the bohemian districts of large American cities. Here budding comics shared the tiny stage with amateur poets, guitarists, folk singers, jazz musicians, sketch players, and others who, for the most part, provided free entertainment to the patrons. The atmosphere was informal, the premises small, and the audiences sympathetic to amateurs and experimenters.

Greenwich Village was the centre of bohemian life. It was the place where artistic ideas and acts were born and tested and from where they emanated. By 1960 or so "The Village" had become the crossroads for comics seeking to develop their acts. The Gaslight, the Cafe Wha?, and others featured one or more nights a week of stand-up comedy, which, however, was screened by management and paid little or nothing. Phil Berger (1985, 133) reports that Bill Cosby worked at the Gaslight and the Wha? and was so good that he once received a raise from $5.00 to $7.50 per set. Others, including Joan Rivers (1986, 236), worked gratis or for whatever they could make from a hat passed through the audience.

The Birth of the Comedy Room

"Comedy room" is the term comics use for the space within a comedy club where they present their acts. As we shall see later, comics have good reason to be concerned with those properties of a room that bear on their performance. From the comics' standpoint, the room is something personal and hence distinct from the club of which it is a part. Today's comedy rooms are typically located in or adjacent to hotels, restaurants, or bars. They are furnished, decorated, and operated for the presentation of stand-up comedy. Most serve food, although only a few serve dinners. Stand-up comedy is their raison d'être.

The early rooms were coffeehouses that began to specialize in comedy. The first opened in 1963 in The Village. This was Gerson "Budd" Friedman's Improvisation Cafe, an establishment that soon came to be known among patrons as The Improv. Friedman had intended the place to be an after-hours hangout for show people, but within two years of opening it had evolved into a showcase and workout room for stand-up comics (Berger 1985, 148). Performers were not paid, but that did not deter its

long list of now-famous veterans, including Woody Allen, Dick Cavett, Milt Kamen, Bill Cosby, and Rodney Dangerfield.

The idea behind The Improv was not copied until 1972, when Mitzi and Sammy Shore and comic writer Rudy DeLuca opened the Comedy Store in Los Angeles. It was run on the same principle: no pay, but an opportunity to work out new acts and showcase new talent. Richard Pryor, David Letterman, and Robin Williams were regular performers at the Comedy Store in its early years. At first this club, too, used only amateur talent.

Among the people for whom hopeful comics showcased their acts at The Improv were television talent scouts. Scouts worked for late-night talk shows, the first television programmes to make stars of comics (Steve Allen and Jack Paar in the 1950s, and Johnny Carson starting in late 1962 [Berger 1985, 166]). The format of these shows was too restrictive to carry stand-up comedy very far as a distinct entertainment form. The performer had only five minutes or so, too little time for his or her act to grow on the audience. Moreover, network television enforced a conservative standard of language and subject matter that left little room for iconoclastic stand-up comedy.

PHASE 4: PROFESSIONALIZATION AND COMMERCIALIZATION

Berger (1985: 381–6) and Borns (1987, 32–4) describe how the rise of cable television effected an explosion of comedy clubs in the United States. First, Home Box Office (HBO) and later Showtime began filming live performances of comics giving concerts and showcasing. The Improv in New York and The Comedy Store in Los Angeles were ideally located in the two centers of the television industry. In December 1975, HBO broadcast its first live concert-length performance of stand-up comedy, featuring Robert Klein at Haverford College (Berger 1985, 381).

The changes over the next two years could not have been predicted. Television viewers suddenly became keenly interested in seeing their heroes of the tube perform in comedy clubs and on concert stages. Simultaneously, younger people grew enamoured of the possibility of becoming TV comics themselves. They flocked to The Improv and The Comedy Store to work out and showcase their acts. As the general public caught on to this trend, they also began to patronize clubs in the hope of seeing the stars of the future. The time was ripe for comedy in general. Saturday Night Live, NBC's sketch comedy programme, went on

the air in 1975, no doubt further raising the public's interest in comedy.

The financial impact on the two clubs was salutary. Their owners made money, which other entrepreneurs were quick to recognize. Two new rooms, Catch a Rising Star and The Comic Strip, opened in New York in 1972 and 1976, respectively, while in Los Angeles Budd Friedman opened his second Improv. Still, most comics performed for little or no pay. They were an enthusiastic gang of amateurs (in the nonpejorative sense) practising an increasingly popular theatre art. The rooms were strictly for showcasing and development.

The Rise of the Professional

Two major factors helped change the stand-up comic's financial situation. One was the comics' strike in 1979 in Los Angeles and the threat of another that same year in New York. The details are presented by Borns (1987, 34–40), and her conclusion is of interest here: "Many credit the strike with being one of the most important elements in creating the current comedy 'boom' because, although the [new] payments were modest, they produced a significant result: comics could now, with a full week's worth of sets, afford to support themselves by *doing comedy*" (39–40). Now there were amateurs *and* professionals in stand-up comedy, who could be distinguished by level of pay and quality of act.

The second factor was the rise of comedy chains and circuits in response to the growing demand for comedy in North America. Berger (1985, 383) describes how this began:

> What both HBO and "Saturday Night Live" did was make a guy like Jerry Stanley possible. Stanley, an aspiring comedian, early on took a left turn in his career and became a promoter, converting the growing interest in comedy in the late 1970s into a new road map for the business.
>
> It happened like this: in August 1979, Stanley approached the owner of Freddie's, a restaurant in Bernardville, N.J., and asked the restauranteur to let him, on the man's worst night of the week, import comics from New York to replace the rock bands that previously had occupied the place's entertainment room. "A comedy night," says Stanley. "That was the idea. I said, 'Hey, you're booking bands at $500, $600. For $200, and a few bucks extra for me, I'll bring in three comics and do a show.'" The format worked, and within a year and a half,

Stanley says he was booking comics into sixteen venues in northern New Jersey – mostly restaurants that had separate rooms for entertainment. Soon, he was getting calls from Cleveland and Pittsburgh, where comedy clubs were going into business. "After two years," says Stanley, "I was booking sixteen out-of-town clubs."

The same year that comics were picketing in Los Angeles and threatening similar action in New York, Stanley was providing his performers with sixty-five dollars, dinner, and drinks for a night's work. Born was the era of the "road warrior," the comic who made his or her living by travelling a circuit of clubs and bars.

At this point remunerative nonshowcase rooms began to appear everywhere. Borns (1987, 40) reports that in 1980 there were ten such places in the United States. By 1987 they numbered somewhere between 250 and 300. The Punch Line chain started up in Atlanta in 1982, the same year that the Funny Bone chain got under way in the Midwest. There are at least six chains today which, together, bring stand-up comedy to every region of the United States. In 1984 the Punch Line booked comics for its ten-club circuit and offered them one- to three-night "gigs" at bars, hotels, and restaurants that regularly employ Punch Line talent (Wieder 1987). Friedman's Improvs, of which there are now eight, reach from one end of the country to the other (Borns 1987, 31).

Today there are, in addition, numerous unaffiliated satellite rooms organized by booking agents into circuits for travelling comics. Tom Sobel's Comedy Caravan is the largest of these. Based in Louisville, Kentucky, Sobel can send comics on a tour through seventy-five cities, covering nineteen states, and lasting twenty-five weeks. The performer never plays the same club twice during a tour. Unlike the chains, these rooms offer other forms of entertainment beside stand-up comedy. Similar, though smaller, circuits exist in and around Louisiana, the Florida Panhandle, the Atlantic Coast, and the West Coast.

THE APPEAL OF STAND-UP COMEDY

The foregoing chronology of stand-up comedy is summarized in figure 1, which includes key Canadian events considered in chapter 2. It appears that this chronology represents the mere beginnings of the art of stand-up comedy. Bob Williams of Spotlite

Figure 1
The History of Stand-up Comedy

Second-oldest profession?	
Greek-Roman prologues	Precursors
18th-century monologues	
Mark Twain lectures 1856–1910	Phase 1:
Vaudeville ca. 1870–1930	Beginning
Borscht Belt hotels 1930s –	Phase 2:
Nightclubs 1930s –	The Concert Act
Coffeehouses 1940s –	
Greenwich Village 1960 –	Phase 3:
Improvisation Cafe (New York) 1963 –	Amateur
Comedy Store (Los Angeles) 1972 –	Experimentation
Gene Taylor's Improv (Toronto) 1974	(new wave)
Yuk Yuk's (Church St, Toronto), 1976–78	
HBO-TV December 1975	
Yuk Yuk's (Yorkville, Toronto) 1978 –	Phase 4:
Punchlines (Vancouver) 1978 –	Professionalization
Comics' strike 1979	and Commercialization
Circuits and chains ca. 1980 –	(modern comedy)
Le festival Juste pour rire, 1983 –	
Yuk Yuk's Komedy Kabarets, 1984 –	

Enterprises, a leading American talent agency, expects "another 5 to 6 years of skyrocketing and then 10 years at the plateau" (Siegel 1987, 33). He predicted that two of the chains will eventually control fifty clubs and satellite rooms each and that a third will control over one hundred.

How do we explain this dramatic success story? It appears that a significant change began in the third phase of the development of stand-up comedy, devotees could coach one another and learn by trial and error what worked and what did not with different audiences. Here notions began to crystallize about what good comedy was, how long one's act should be, how to begin and end well, and so on.

During phase 3 comics broke out of the old strait-jacket of slapstick; simplistic, stolen one-liners; hackneyed, street-corner narrative jokes; and cheap-shot, aggressive gags directed at minorities, women, and the poor. The "service function" of comedy practised in strip and burlesque joints and between the main song and dance acts in nightclubs was abandoned, and its seedy

image accordingly vanished. In short, comedy was becoming more profound, returning to the substantial wit of Twain and Rogers, but without resurrecting their lengthy monologues.

The transition brought something new to entertainment: *take-home humour.* Most live variety comedy is lost once presented. We can only watch and appreciate the antics of the clown, the skills of the juggler, and the tricks of the magician. We cannot replay for our friends the gestures of the talented mime or the intricate details of a lengthy monologue. Of course, one-liners, street jokes, and ethnic gags could be taken home, but by the early 1960s the last was increasingly considered racist and the first two were simply commonplace. By contrast, the descriptive monologues and narrative jokes of the modern comic fit the bill perfectly; they were then, as they are now, of manageable length and about familiar events, delivered in a conversational style that invited repeating the next day at work, at the bar, in the den, whatever.

The entertainment middleman, so to speak, needed no props, scenery, or costumes. His or her stage was bare, like the comic's whose ideas he or she was now re-presenting with, to be sure, considerably less polish. It was the opportunity to tell someone else that counted, not so much the quality of the second-hand performance. Today's stand-up comic is aware of middlemen. Some play directly to them, finishing their acts with a memorable couple of lines fit to be repeated.

The milieu of The Village fostered this transition. Changes in performance opportunities introduced by cable TV set in motion a chain of reactions that eventually made it possible to earn a living from this brash new art (phase 4). It appears that no one knew a transition of this magnitude was under way. They were too much a part of it to see the broader trend, a situation not unlike the one in New Orleans between approximately 1890 and 1910 when jazz, another American art, was born (Buerkle and Barker 1973, chapter 1).[7]

The contemporary appeal of stand-up comedy raises two questions: Is stand-up comedy a profound new theatre art that is here to stay? Why has it become popular today rather than at an earlier time? As the preceding paragraphs indicate, industry insiders believe the answer to the first question is yes. This author agrees. We shall return to that questions at various points later on.

As for the second question, needless to say, a number of propositions have been put forth to explain why stand-up comedy

is currently so popular. They can be classified in two groups: comedy as *tension release* and comedy as *affordable entertainment.*

According to the tension-release explanation, stand-up comedy is popular because people have a desperate need to laugh in a world of serious and apparently unresolvable problems. A variation on this theme is that certain occupations generate tension, which laughing helps relieve. Borns (1987, 14–16, 27, 52–3) argues that people are attracted to stand-up comedy because it is cathartic. By laughing at the unlaughable aspects of life – guilt, sin, deceit, shame – people find momentary relief from the pent-up tension. Both versions of this explanation see stand-up comedy as a new and effective form of tension relief.

There are at least two weaknesses in this line of reasoning. One is that tension is nothing new. Life has been as tense, if not more so, at other periods in recent history. Why wasn't stand-up comedy popular then? Second, laughter is not the only way to relieve tension. Any absorbing activity has the capacity to remove us psychologically and temporarily from our troubles – skiing, acting in a play, reading a good book, watching a football game. These are as available to the public as stand-up. One must conclude that to date no scientifically verifiable link between the popularity of stand-up comedy and its capacity to relieve tension has been established such that the second can be called a condition for the first.[8]

Comedy as affordable entertainment is a more plausible explanation, although incomplete. It holds that stand-up comedy is an affordable alternative to theatre, films, and live and recorded music. The comedy clubs came along and filled the gap left by a decline in public taste for discotheques and rock bars. That a large proportion of the comedy club audience is below age thirty-five adds support to this proposition. Young adults, in particular, like the art of stand-up comedy as it is currently being presented, can afford to patronize it, and want to do so in significant numbers.

Nonetheless, this explanation ignores the historical development of stand-up comedy. There *was* a demand for an affordable entertainment alternative in the early 1980s; luckily for the art of stand-up comedy, it had developed to the point where it could fill that demand. Circumstances could have been different. The art might have floundered as amateur experimentation in the inaccessible bohemian sections of a few large cities. It might have flourished briefly and then died, like commercial folk music.

It might have gone the marginal route of jazz. Had there been an equivalent large-scale demand for affordable entertainment in the early 1960s, stand-up comedy could not have answered the call. By the early 1970s, however, this art had made the experimental transition (phase 3) into its present form (phase 4).

Another factor in considering the popularity of stand-up is the inherent appeal of comedy in general. People enjoy laughing. Laughter brings relief from routine and discipline and unites those who share it. Reacting to comic monologues, audiences affirm certain standards and ridicule those who reject them (Klapp 1962, 62). So long as it is affordable, available, and acceptable to a sizeable public, commercial comedy appears bound to succeed. Once stand-up comedy was presented to and consumed by a mass public as an enduring, routine entertainment rather than as the novelty it had once been, its success was guaranteed.

And a success it has been, for stand-up comedy has spread from North American to Europe and Australia. French-speaking stand-up comics now work in France, Belgium, Quebec, and Switzerland. A small but growing number of comics, most of them Canadians, work in both English and French, notably Chris Lorne Elliot, André-Philippe Gagnon, Yvon Deschamps, Mike Macdonald, and Roland Magdane. Indeed, the new art appears first to have spread from the United States to Canada. Here it caught the fancy of anglophones and shortly thereafter of francophones.

CHAPTER TWO

Stand-up Comedy Comes to Canada

There are no written histories of stand-up comedy in Canada. Canada's role in this form of entertainment, as in many others, has been that of borrower from the United States – because of proximity, first borrower. Nowhere can Canada be seen as a contributor to the line of development that started with Mark Twain, notwithstanding the success in the United States of some famous comics who got their start in Canada, more of which later.

Still, the history of comedy in Canada is similar in many ways to that in the United Sates. Vaudeville eventually came to Canada (Lenton 1985), although few Canadians ever performed in it (Stuart 1985). Millions of Canadians watched vaudeville shows and the comics in them. Millions of Canadians must also, later, have watched comedy nightclub acts in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s and listened to radio and television broadcasts of similar material. American comics stimulated Canadian imitators, who played in their local nightclubs and burlesque theatres.

The beloved Québécois *humoriste* Olivier Guimond was one of them. In his late teens he worked as a raconteur and dancer in the cabarets and burlesque theatres along St Catherine and St Laurent streets in Montreal (Latulippe 1985, 9, 180). And he was typical of many stand-up comics of his day, variety performers delivering several forms of entertainment. Guimond, in addition to being a raconteur and dancer, was also a singer, mime, clown, acrobat, and sketch player. He was least known for his raconteur performances of quasi-stand-up comedy.

Still, neither the rest of the United States nor Canada was in a position to participate in the transformation described in chapter 1. New York City was uniquely destined to be the scene

of this process. However, once the transformation had taken place, North America was ready to profit from it. The first sign was the opening of the Comedy Store in Los Angeles in 1972. Two years later, the first comedy club in Canada of which we have any record started up in Toronto.

NEW YORK NORTH

There are at least two reasons the international extension of the artistic ferment in New York began in Toronto. Toronto is close to New York. This is significant, for the link between the entertainment communities of Toronto and New York in 1974 had to be a personal one. Remember that the mass media stand-up comedy on HBO was still at least a year away. Furthermore, the art being exported was, at the time, strictly anglophone. Toronto is Canada's largest city as well as the acknowledged trendsetter for many aspects of Canadian popular culture.

Phase 3 in Canada

In 1974 Larry Horowitz, now a senior comic with the Yuk Yuk's comedy chain, opened Gene Taylor's Improv in the Drawing Room at the Friar's Tavern in Toronto.[1] It operated in ways similar to Friedman's Improv, providing informal, unpaid opportunities for comics to work on their art. Then Friar's closed. The next year Horowitz opened a club in a restaurant called The Act IV under the name Improv at The Act IV. From Thursday through Saturday comics and other entertainers worked without pay until the building was sold by its owners.

Between 1975 and 1976 a comedy night was established at Harbourfront's Bohemian Embassy. Here, Mark Breslin, the man who was later to launch Yuk Yuk's, met Paul Mandell and Steve Shuster, all of whom were using the occasion to shape their acts. According to Jack Kapica (1976), Breslin, whose metier at the time was clowning, fell in love with stand-up during these sessions and, with the encouragement of Mandell, Shuster, and Horowitz (who was also working there), opened his own room when The Embassy folded in April 1976.

In early June of that year, Breslin began a Wednesday night comedy club in the basement of Toronto's Church Street Community Centre (Kapica 1976). The place was dubbed Yuk Yuk's by Breslin and comic Joel Axler. It was a setting, like the art

itself at this time, in the rough. Breslin served as emcee, and might have been the person who wielded the infamous hook that was used to remove, by the neck, novices whose acts were more than the audience could bear. Still, the audience was reported to have been tolerant of a great deal and to have packed the little room each night. Most of the ten or so acts presented on a typical evening were amateur; a few professional headliners gave patrons their money's worth.

Comedy was experimental here, as it was at the time in the United States. Breslin strove for an antiestablishment form of the art. Performers were encouraged to try anything for a laugh: stand-up comedy was a hit-or-miss proposition. Comedy would have to be more predictably routine before it could be said that the art had matured, before it would become a commercial product. In the meantime, the experimental atmosphere attracted many artists, painters, and writers, among them Margaret Atwood. Polish, standardization, predictability – in short, the routinization of the art – would eventually disperse the huddle of intellectuals. Commercial appeal would significantly erode the level of spontaneity and originality they valued most in art.

But for awhile Yuk Yuk's remained an artist's mecca. Breslin leased the basement of the Church Street Community Centre for thirty-eight dollars a night (Enchin 1986, 100). That was reasonable, but its inadequacy as a venue for a verbal performing art was never in doubt; Breslin referred to the place as "Toronto's funniest fire trap" (Oakley 1983, 25). Nonetheless, stand-up prospered there, and it soon became clear that the art, its performers, and its large and enthusiastic audiences deserved better.

On to Phase 4

The better turned up in the neighbouring district of Yorkville at 1280 Bay Street, the site Yuk Yuk's occupies to this day. For twenty-four thousand dollars – contributed from his own pocket, from investors, and from the Bank of Nova Scotia – Breslin renovated a small basement room. Since its opening in March of 1978, Yuk Yuk's has grown into a mecca for many of Canada's aspiring comics. It is also one of the oldest continuing comedy clubs in the country (Enchin 1986).

But, financially, times had become tough. For some reason, the new club did not draw the large audiences that had filled the basement on Church Street. Patrons wanted liquor, but Breslin did not believe that comedy and alcohol mixed well. And there

were now other comedy clubs in Toronto, among others, Chuckles, Night Moves, and The Flamingo Cafe (*The Canadian,* 1979). Although none of these survived, they may have temporarily attracted some of Yuk Yuk's customers during a financially troubled period. To make matters worse, Breslin, whose training at university was in English rather than management, made some questionable investments (Enchin 1986, 100). An attempt to expand to Montreal in 1980 failed, as did a television pilot for the Global Television Network. A recession gripped Toronto in 1982, further reducing audiences, although by then the club was open six nights a week. The economic climate and the club's financial performance made the Bank of Nova Scotia nervous, and it recalled its loan.

Then, with the combined business savvy of an accountant, the club manager, and the Toronto-Dominion Bank, the enterprise was saved from disaster. Instead of going under it began to prosper. In March 1984 Breslin opened his first expansion club in Ottawa, Yuk Yuk's Komedy Kabaret, and later that year his second, in Hamilton. Their success stimulated a string of new clubs. In 1985 the Yuk Yuk's logo appeared in Edmonton, Rochester, and Buffalo. The following year saw new clubs in Halifax, Calgary, Victoria, Winnipeg, and two new locations in Toronto. The clubs in Buffalo and Victoria closed in 1986, but St Catherine's, Saskatoon, and London, Ontario, had clubs by 1987. In 1988 the chain expanded to Kitchener, Vancouver, Mississauga, Hawaii, and Hamilton, Bermuda, and in 1989 to Thunder Bay. The sign posted over the entrance to Yuk Yuk's Studio – the Queen Street outlet for new acts in Toronto – is still accurate: The World's Largest Comedy Chain. With nineteen clubs, it is larger than the ten-club Punch Line chain in Atlanta.

Controlling a string of clubs is only one side of the comedy industry. In Canada, as in the United States, chain and independent booking agencies do a substantial business contracting comics for one- to three-night gigs in bars, hotels, and restaurants that regularly or occasionally employ such entertainers. These are known as satellite rooms in the comedy industry.[2] For Yuk Yuk's comics, bookings in these places are arranged through its agency Funny Business Productions Incorporated, eighty-two a week in mid-1989. Today Funny Business can assure its comics three and four nights of work per week at affiliated and satellite rooms.

If the word *chain* also includes satellite rooms, then, according to some comics, Yuk Yuk's may not be the world's largest chain.

That distinction may belong to the Punch Line empire. In any case, expansion is still under consideration. Breslin spoke in a recent interview (Enchin 1986) about opening a club in Los Angeles and, further down the line, another in London, England. There are, however, no plans to enter the Montreal market, where the demand for anglophone comedy is limited.

COMEDY WEST-COAST STYLE

At the time Breslin was opening his Yorkville club, Rich Elwood was inaugurating a club in Vancouver in a basement rented from the Queen Elizabeth Theatre Restaurant. There was born The Punchlines Comedy Theatre, an entertainment enterprise that now competes with Yuk Yuk's for engagements in western Canada and to a lesser extent in Ontario and Quebec. Punchlines also books Canadian comics into rooms in Idaho and Washington State. It is unrelated to the previously mentioned Atlanta chain with a similar name.

It took only a year to demonstrate that stand-up comedy could sell in Vancouver. In late 1979, following a six-month period of renovation, Punchlines moved to its present Gastown location on the second floor of a hundred-year old warehouse at 15 Water Street. Elwood now had shows running from Wednesday through Saturday, with a twenty-minute portion at the beginning of the Wednesday show reserved for amateurs. The amateur segment, however, turned out to be too small for the number of performers requesting stage time, and soon Tuesday evenings were established as exclusively open-mike.

For approximately three years, starting in mid-1980, CFOX broadcasted these Tuesday evening sessions on FM radio. Disc jockeys from the station served as emcees. The resulting publicity heightened awareness and the appreciation of stand-up comedy in the Vancouver area. It also bred a flock of enthusiastic recruits to the art, adding to the competition for already scarce time on Punchlines' amateur stage.

The collaboration came to an end when it was realized that the station and the club were heading, in one critical sense, in opposite directions. The former began playing more and more heavy metal, with its coarse language and off-colour humour, while the latter was increasingly pressing its comics to present humour that would be acceptable for television, the corporate hospitality suite, and the community at large. But some association with a radio station was, in principle, a good one. Six

months after terminating the arrangement with CFOX, Punchlines struck a new one with CKKS-FM, a newcomer to the local radio scene with an upper-middle-class audience. This collaboration, which ran from February 1985 to April 1986, ended when amateur night was moved to Monday. Today Tuesday is a showcase night for advanced amateurs, whose performances are still sporadically broadcast on radio. And, since September 1987, audio tapes of Punchlines performances can be heard on Sunday-night radio.

The expansion to comedy six days a week was accompanied by an expansion of the number of shows on weekends. In 1982, midnight shows were introduced on Saturdays; two years later they were introduced on Fridays. Late-night shows are popular across North America, both on stage and on television.

The Elwoods (brother Mark joined the business in 1985) have helped expand the ways comedy clubs present humour. The collaboration with radio stations is one example. Another is the show presented Wednesday and Thursday nights by an improvisation group called The No Name Players. They began performing at Punchlines in 1984 as part of a show that otherwise consisted of stand-up. Since then the club has further diversified; now clientele can watch video-taped sketches shown on a large screen introduced in January 1987.[3] Local comics write, produce, and act in the videos.

YUK YUK'S AND PUNCHLINES

Although no precise figures are available, Punchlines and Yuk Yuk's, in terms of the number of bookings and admissions into affiliated and satellite rooms, are the two largest stand-up enterprises in Canada. Certainly in the area of admissions, and probably in bookings as well, Yuk Yuk's leads. Despite a common ground of large business volume, the two chains have moved in somewhat different directions within the world of stand-up comedy.

Until recently Punchlines, unlike Yuk Yuk's, rejected expansion through additional clubs. Instead it cultivated a network of satellite rooms in the West where it booked comics. At one time Punchlines booked as far east as Toronto, Hamilton, and Ottawa, but it became difficult to compete against Yuk Yuk's and the independent booking agencies from so great a distance. Whether Yuk Yuk's will face a similar problem in its new Vancouver location remains to be seen. The nature of this competition is considered in chapter 7.

The most profound difference, however, is that one is more likely to hear blue – that is, four-letter-word – comedy at Yuk Yuk's than at Punchlines. It is Breslin's policy that comedy goes uncensored in his rooms. Moreover, he prefers antiestablishment humour presented in language unsuitable for television. (The public already has plenty of television humour, he notes.)

The atmosphere in Yuk Yuk's clubs is somewhat more iconoclastic than is Punchlines'. Some Yuk Yuk's audiences are invited to stand for the playing of "O Canada," the ending of which is drowned out by the sound of air warfare. At Yuk Yuk's uptown club in Toronto, a recorded female voice commands, "Please stand for the national anthem. All fags and lesbians please remain seated." At the Yorkville club this command is omitted. Instead, during the anthem a television monitor presents the national flag and Canadian nature scenes.

Yuk Yuk's and Punchlines do make considerable use of the television video, and in more or less the same ways.[4] As for improvisational team comedy, it is available only at Punchlines, since Breslin argues that it mixes poorly with pure stand-up (*Calgary Herald* 1986). Nor does Yuk Yuk's, unlike Punchlines, feature sketch comedy. The only exception this author observed was the four-man group Some People's Kids, which performs occasionally during Wednesday amateur nights at the Yuk Yuk's in Calgary. In a manner similar to Punchlines, however, the Yuk Yuk's Yorkville club in Toronto has joined hands with CHUM-FM, which sponsors and advertises Tuesday evening shows. Admission on Tuesdays is $1.04, which matches the station's call number. Yuk Yuk's also produced a long-playing record, *The Funniest Fifty Minutes Ever,* featuring its top comics.

Both Punchlines and Yuk Yuk's sponsor the publicity and recruitment contest known in comedy circles up and down the West Coast as the laugh-off. This, an American invention, features large numbers of amateurs and junior professionals performing before a panel of judges in an elimination sequence that resembles a sports tournament. Winners at laugh-offs get special billing at the beginning or in the middle of one or more weekend shows. At some laugh-offs in the United States, winners get a regional or national television spot or an opportunity to perform in a major American comedy club.

Laugh-offs are now being conducted by organizations other than the booking agencies. For instance, in January 1987 Labatt's Beer started a laugh-off in Ontario, the Schooner Comedy Quest. Contestants are sought from university campuses. A Calgary

radio station ran a laugh-off in 1987. The winner received an all-expense-paid trip to Los Angeles to perform at The Comedy Store.

In general terms Yuk Yuk's can be said to have a national, centralized orientation, Punchlines a regional, decentralized orientation. Yuk Yuk's is a national chain of clubs that is becoming international. Their co-owner managers across the land are required to hire a large proportion of their comics from the Funny Business agency. The comics come from around the country and perform from coast to coast. Policy on club operations emanates from the national headquarters in Toronto and ultimately from Mark Breslin.

Although variations such as those considered in this section are possible, there appears to be a tendency to look to Toronto for directions on what to do and where to go next in the evolving world of stand-up comedy. The regional, decentralized orientation at Punchlines, on the other hand, encourages less standardization between its Vancouver club and its satellite rooms.[5]

ANGLOPHONE COMEDY IN QUEBEC

In March 1979, Ernie Butler opened a club by the name of Stitches on Crescent Street in downtown Montreal. Initially it featured various forms of entertainment, but eventually it specialized in stand-up comedy and had a Wednesday amateur night. Stitches closed in 1981 after Butler got married and involved in a career in real estate.

Finding that his interest in stand-up was more enduring than he had realized, Butler opened Hemmingway's Comedy Cabaret in 1984. Five months later he moved to Woody's Pub on Bishop Street downtown and started The Comedy Nest. Like nearly every comedy club in Canada, The Comedy Nest operates in space leased from the owner of the building. By Canadian standards, Butler's room is small. It is located on the second floor and is reached by passing through the pub below. With the demand for anglophone comedy growing in the Montreal area, a second Comedy Nest was opened on the West Island in June 1987.

The Comedy Nest does not go in for supplementary acts such as videos, improv teams, or sketch groups. It was, however, the scene of a unique experiment in stand-up: Between December 1986 and April 1987 Butler, a unilingual anglophone, collaborated

with bilingual entertainer and show-business organizer Louise Sauvé to bring French-language comedy to his club. During this period and all-French show, Le Fou rire, was presented every Wednesday evening.

Although my contacts with francophone comics indicate that they deeply appreciated what Butler and Sauvé were trying to do, the experiment failed. A combination of geographic, economic, and artistic factors explains why. One, Bishop Street was too far from the concentration of French-speaking Montrealers to attract an adequate francophone audience. Two, for Le Fou rire, a small staff of francophones had to be hired to tend the bar, take tickets, and operate the soundboard. Three, unlike most anglophone comics in Canada, their francophone counterparts are unionized (through L'Union des artistes, or UDA). As a consequence their wages are significantly higher. Four, there are important theatrical differences in the production of francophone and anglophone stand-up that posed insurmountable problems. These are considered in the next section.

Another unique supplementary activity of The Comedy Nest is its role in the international comedy festival held each July in Montreal Juste pour rire (Just for Laughs). The festival showcases top talent; it is not a talent contest like the laugh-offs. From its beginning in 1983 through 1985 it was entirely French. When English-language comedy was introduced in 1986, Ernie Butler was asked to act as an adviser. He has also provided stage time at The Comedy Nest for anglophone performers from overseas who want to familiarize themselves with North American audiences.

Like Yuk Yuk's and Punchlines, The Comedy Nest has an affiliated booking and managerial agency for its performers, Laughing Stock Company. Though exact figures are lacking, the number of bookings and admissions into parent clubs and satellite rooms suggest that The Comedy Nest is a smaller operation than the other two chains. At The Comedy Nest shows are presented only four days a week, Thursday through Sunday, in two rooms that hold 100 and 175 people, compared with six days of shows at Punchlines (capacity 225) and, depending on the city, four to six days of shows at Yuk Yuk's clubs (average capacity 230). The number of anglophone satellite rooms within a day's drive of Montreal is severely limited. Outside Quebec, in Ontario and the Atlantic provinces, competition with Yuk Yuk's is intense.

LA STAND-UP COMÉDIE QUÉBÉCOISE

There exists in francophone Quebec a distinct comedic tradition that has developed largely independently of mainstream comedy in Canada and the United States. Francophone comics are known as *humoristes* or *comiques,* the equivalent of our generic stand-up comics. Their tradition is a blend of practices and ideas from France and francophone Quebec. Only with the widespread availability of English-language film and television and a population sufficiently bilingual to understand them have anglophone entertainment influences begun to penetrate Québécois society.[6]

These influences, probably strongest since the advent of cable television twelve to fifteen years ago, have competed with the indigenous tradition. The *humoristes* have not shown, as a group, a marked interest in learning English. That is, most see their careers as unfolding in Quebec, in France, or in some other French-speaking area where, so far as their occupation is concerned, English is not an asset. Indeed, for some, a refusal to learn or speak English is proof of their commitment to Quebec culture. It is also true that to work as a comic in a second language requires an exceptional grasp of that language and the culture it expresses. It is likely that there will never be more than a handful of pure stand-up comics who can perform well in two languages, developing their own acts in both. The current practice of some anglophone and francophone headliners of having their monologues translated is only a partial solution to this problem.

As well as to the rest of North America, quasi-stand-up and mixed-stand-up comedy found their way to New France. In Quebec, however, they developed in their own special way, owing in part to a lengthy period of social, political, and cultural isolation from France and the nearby anglophone world. The tradition, some three hundred years later, produced the three distinct *humoristes* of modern Quebec entertainment: *le monologuiste, le mime,* and *l'imitateur,* the impressionist who is probably a direct descendant of the satirical monologuist of eighteenth-century France. It should come as no surprise that the pure stand-up comic whose art dates to late-nineteenth-century America is only today becoming a recognizable type among the Québécois. This new *humoriste* is known simply as *le stand-up comique.*

As one might expect, given the recent appearance of stand-up comedy, there were no comedy clubs in French Quebec until 1988. Even now most *humoristes* perform most of the time in touring groups such as Les Nouveaux monstres de l'humour and Le Groupe sanguin. These groups perform in local theatres across Quebec and in New Brunswick. Individual *vedettes* (headliners) also tour this way, presenting concerts in the theatres and better nightclubs. The public thirst for variety comedy is further met through television. In Quebec and elsewhere in French Canada, amateur and professional improvisational *équipes* (teams) provide live variety humour through La Ligue nationale d'improvisation. The teams in La Ligue compete against one another in matches structured along the lines of a hockey tournament. Intraleague playoffs extend the "season" in some localities.

The first Québécois comedy club was, in effect, a continuation of the efforts started at The Comedy Nest. In March 1988, with help from Ernie Butler, Louise Sauvé opened a small second-floor room called Le Club de comédie francophone le fou rire on trendy St Denis Street in the heart of French Montreal. There were two shows weekly, one Friday and one Saturday, with plans for expansion as demand grew. As at The Comedy Nest, there were no amateur nights. Although *comiques* of both sexes were welcome, Sauvé planned to give special attention to the development of female performers to help correct discrimination practiced in both francophone and anglophone stand-up comedy (discussed later). By July of 1988, however, the club had folded, victim of skimpy financial resources and disagreements with the owners of the room. Sauvé, undaunted, hopes to reopen soon in another location.

The routine availability of francophone variety humour in and around Quebec is enhanced considerably by a number of special annual events. In the fall of each year, auditions are held in the principal cities of Quebec to discover young *humoristes*. In 1986 approximately two-hundred artists were evaluated during these auditions (*Le Magazine officiel du festival Juste pour rire* 1987, 25). Each year the best are invited to perform at Club Soda in Montreal. Here, during the winter months, they present their acts on successive Monday nights in a program called *Lundi juste pour rire,* at which time they have access to a producer and a writer. Club Soda is, in effect, a temporary comedy room created especially for the development of these budding performers.

The most promising of this group are invited to join La Tournée

juste pour rire, a company of *humoristes* who tour the major centres in Quebec during the spring for the purpose of gaining experience. By summer they are sufficiently polished to perform in the annual festival Juste pour rire.

A spot in this festival is a major career boost for comics. The only event of its kind anywhere, in 1987 it drew from among the best variety comedy acts available in Canada, France, Belgium, England, Switzerland, Australia, and the United States. It is now routinely scouted by agents from major televisions shows and studios in the United States. Excerpts from each festival are packaged for English and French television and aired not only in Canada but also in several other countries.

Anglophone and francophone comics in Quebec have at least one important career contingency in common – a lack of regular amateur nights where stand-ups can get their feet wet and develop acts good enough for performance on Lundi juste pour rire or as an opening spot at The Comedy Nest or Le Fou rire. We shall return to this predicament in chapter 4.

THE INDEPENDENTS

Between 1978 and 1984, probably every Canadian city of 300,000 people or more had at least one comedy club. Apart from Yuk Yuk's, Punchlines, and The Comedy Nest, most clubs have come and gone, lost in the flurry of competition from these three, other local clubs, and alternative forms of entertainment. Hiccups in Ottawa, Peppers in Hamilton, and several clubs in Toronto and Montreal endured for several years, earned a measure of fame in the community, and then disappeared. Others opened in late 1986 or in 1987, at the time of this study, and it remains to be seen whether they will survive. Arbuckles in Toronto did not; it opened in August 1987 and closed in April 1988.

We move on to three clubs with reasonably long histories that were still in business at the time of this study. One, The Brass Cat Comedy Theatre in downtown Calgary, started in 1983 as Snickers. Over the years and under a string of different managers, it has offered varying combinations of sketch, improvisational, and pure stand-up comedy in a dinner theatre-like atmosphere. The Brass Cat has been one of Punchlines' satellite rooms, although performers from central Canada and the United States are also booked through other agencies. The Brass Cat's cuisine and affiliation with Punchlines lend a more refined atmosphere than is available at its cross-town competitor, Yuk Yuk's.

Nonetheless, since September 1987 The Brass Cat has been offering improv only; it may be on its way out as a stand-up comedy room.

In Winnipeg, Rumor's Comedy Club in Gallagher's Restaurant has been operating since 1985. Like The Brass Cat, it features a dinner menu. Both establishments are rather more refined in decor then the typical comedy club, which tends to be plain. It is policy at Rumor's to book only well-known performers from the United States, and consequently none of the respondents in the present study has ever played there. In Winnipeg as in Calgary, Yuk Yuk's is the stiffest competitor.

The granddaddy of the independent clubs is Leo Dufour's Komedy Korner in Windsor, Ontario. Indeed, it has legitimate claim to the title of third oldest comedy club in Canada, starting as the Comedy Corner in 1980 and in 1982 moving one street over to its present location to become the Komedy Korner. It is located in leased space on the third floor over a restaurant, which supplies snacks. The comics who play this club rate it as one of the best in the country, a judgment that holds for both its ambiance and its managerial policies. The latter are well in tune with the needs and life-style of comics, for Dufour is himself a comic of considerable experience who still emcees from time to time. Because of a shortage of available Canadian comics, the Komedy Korner is forced to hire the majority of its acts from the United States.

REGIONAL STAND-UP COMEDY

Little can be said about regional stand-up comedy in Canada. No study has systematically examined it, and this author's exposure to it has been haphazard. Mention is made here so as to complete our portrait of stand-up comedy in Canada and indicate a fruitful area for future research.

Regional stand-up is distinguished from what might be called mass stand-up by local references, which are relished by the locals who make up the principal part of the audience. Mass stand-up exploits the people, events, and situations familiar to big-city dwellers everywhere in North America. The comics who practice it are interchangeable parts in the vast machine of mass entertainment. Regional comics are more esoteric.

To my knowledge, regional comedy in Canada is found only in Quebec, the Maritime provinces, and Newfoundland. Comedy that succeeds at Club Soda and winds up as part of the festival

Juste pour rire is not of this variety. But outside this larger market is a thriving regional Quebec humour, and many *humoristes,* especially the *monologuistes* and *stand-up comiques,* have a local repertoire on which they can draw when performance circumstances call for it. Even anglophone comics in Montreal become regional from time to time, for example when they adopt Québécois accents to cover a local topic.

A regional stand-up comic of considerable renown and appeal throughout the maritime provinces is General John Cabot Trail of the Cape Breton Liberation Army. A significant part of General John's act is devoted to the distinctive qualities of Cape Bretoners and their (humourously conceived) desire for independence from Canada. Seafaring lore dots his presentation, as when a half-dozen members of the audience are brought onstage to participate in a ceremony involving a mackerel. Before it is over each has to kiss a fish "caught fresh that day."

Buddy Wah'sis Name and the Other Fellas are a trio that tours Newfoundland spreading the brand of humour and talk for which that province is justifiably famous. An older hand on the circuit is Al Clouston, a droll raconteur who collects Newfoundland stories and presents them in after-dinner acts throughout the island. Perhaps the following account from Clouston's collection *We Rant and We Roar* (pp. 2–3) captures as well as anything the spirit of regional stand-up comedy in Canada:

DERE'S NUTIN' WRONG WID DAT B'Y

In every community a certain percentage of the population believe that the government is fair game and if they can fulfil their needs by getting any government department to pay for them, then, "dere's nutin' wrong wid dat b'y!" It is like an incurable disease and lasts all through their lives.

I live on Forest Road [in St. John's], and a quarter of a mile further down Forest Road, there are three government institutions, the General Hospital, Fever Hospital and Her Majesty's Penitentiary. It was one day in May, 1960, that I had a humourous encounter on Forest Road with one of those curious people who will get the government to pay for anything they can.

My mother had died the day before and I was on my way to our old home and this encounter gave me the laughs I needed.

While proceeding to my car, a man shouted to me from across the road. I looked over and saw a man who was about fifty-five years of age, he was using a cane and was obviously quite crippled. I walked

over to him and as I approached, he said without any preliminaries, "Skipper, Skipper, where do you get d'passes? I want a pass to get in d' 'ospital." (In those days a pass was a written order the Department of Health to admit one to hospital.) I replied that he would have to see Mr. Harding. "Yes," he said, "I minds 'n now, dat's 'e's name, 'Ardin'. Ol' man, where do I find 'ee?" I told him he would have to go to the Confederation Building [provincial capital]. "Confederation Buildin', wat's dat ol' man?" "That's Joey's [Smallwood's] new home," I replied. "Yes," he said, "I 'erd 'e 'ad a new 'ome. Dat's it is it? 'Ow do I get in dere?" So I said, "Get in with me, I'll give you a race in." And in surprise he said, "Will eh?"

We proceeded to my car and drove to the Confederation Building. As we did so, a one-sided conversation ensued.

My friend started this way: "Just down to see d'missus, thy're gonna give 'er a release d'fifteen of d' mont' an' I'm gonin' carry 'er 'ome to —— . She's down in d'Penitentiary" (she was there for bootlegging). That gave me the first laugh because I thought he was going to say the hospital. He continued: "I was some h'ugly wid dem down dere dis marnin' b'y. Dey only allowed me ten minutes to look at 'er through d' bars. She got some fat d'winter b'y. Young see, b'y." I said, "How old is she?" "Farty-eight," he said. Then he went on and here is where the government is fair game: "I wants a pass now to go in the 'ospital so I won't have to pay any board while I'm waitin' fer d'missus, see 'ol man."

The conversation continued much the same as this until we arrived at the Confederation Building. As he got ready to get out of the car, he turned to me and asked, "How much is dis gonna cost to carry me in 'ere 'ol man?" I told him nothing and he turned to me quickly and announced loudly, "OOOH, YOU WERKS FER D'GOVAMENT."

CANADIAN HUMOUR

Canadian oral humour consists of much more than stand-up comedy. We have already made brief reference to staged improvisational and live sketch groups. Prominent examples of the latter include Spring Thaw and, today, The Frantics. There have also been famous radio and television sketches, as exemplified in *SCTV* and the *Royal Canadian Air Farce.* The Québécois enjoyed the 1940s radio sketches with the puppet Fridolin in the *Fridolinades,* and from the 1960s to the present there were the satirical French songs of Robert Charlebois and Michel Rivard (Lacomb 1988). There is also a certain amount of ethnic humour. Although it is not part of this study, I have heard mention from

time to time of comics who make the rounds in Italian, Jewish, and Ukrainian circles, among others, telling jokes that only insiders can readily appreciate.

Such manifestations of oral humour, taken together with written forms – novels, poems, plays – have raised two recurrent questions: Is there a distinct Canadian humour? And are Canadians especially funny people? On these issues there is considerable speculation but little scientific evidence that can be brought to bear.

Given Canada's historical ties to Britain, it is not surprising that music hall, the British equivalent of vaudeville, found frequent outlets in this country. For the same reason anglophone Canadians have been receptive to the British literary nonsense tradition that runs from Lewis Carroll to Monty Python's Flying Circus, from the light revue of Noel Coward to today's Beyond the Fringe. Gina Mallet (1987) argues that in Canada these two traditions, music hall and nonsense, blend with the varieties of American stand-up comedy to produce a distinct and highly appealing hybrid humour. The content of this humour is further shaped by the colonial history of Canadians, who suffered a sense of inferiority at being born and raised in an outpost and who were subtly encouraged to be observers and imitators rather than participants and initiators.

Still, Mallet (1987, 112) doubts that this synthesis has endured. Rather, today it is "shaped by the international homogeneity of TV." Likewise, Mark Breslin observes: "I don't think that you can distinguish or compare Canadian comics in any way shape or form. You can't compare the industry so how can you compare the art? If I took all of the comics in Canada and I flew them down to the USA, and we all went on at the Comedy Store one night, the audience wouldn't know the difference. Which I guess is good – unless you happen to be a *rabid Canadian Nationalist*" (Oakley 1983, 27). Apart from occasional gaps in the knowledge of American comics about some aspect of daily life in Canada, the American and Canadian comics observed in this study were indistinguishable in content and style. The only exception is the Canadian regional comedy mentioned in the preceding section.

Apart from this question of a distinct Canadian humour, Canada, since the 1950s, has certainly contributed to the international comedy scene, and not in the way implied by emcee John Candy at the 1988 festival Juste pour rire when he quipped, "Anywhere in the world all you have to say is 'Canada' and people laugh. That's the Canadian way of humour." More pro-

foundly, Canada's contribution has been performing sketch comedy and writing and producing comedy for sketches and shows. American television has been the chief outlet here, although there have been live performances as well. Examples of internationally popular Canadian sketch comedy are found in Wayne and Shuster, the Royal Canadian Air Farce, and Second City TV. Among Canadian writers are Lorne Michaels, who wrote for the American show Saturday Night Live; Andrew Alexander, the producer of Second City TV, now performing in three cities with plans to open soon in Los Angeles; Ivan Reitman, who wrote several Hollywood films including *Animal House, Meatballs,* and *Ghostbusters;* and Winnipeger David Steinberg, who started the famous Chicago improvisation group Second City and is now a film producer. And, though its history is relatively short, stand-up comedy in Canada has nurtured some famous performers: Howie Mandel, Rich Little, Jim Carrey, Tommy Chong, and the recent Québécois sensation, impressionist André-Philippe Gagnon.

Such contributions to national and international entertainment are not made overnight. Polished acts are the product of consistent, often intense daily effort over a period of many years. In the realm of stand-up, the fruits of this effort are routinely presented in the comedy clubs and rooms across Canada. Here the novice slowly and usually painfully learns the art and craft of making people laugh.

CHAPTER THREE

Comedy Club Comedy

The comedy club is the heart of stand-up comedy, while the comics are its soul. It is in the comedy club that the majority of respondents in this study started their careers. Here they learned about the occupational subculture of stand-up comics. Here they discovered the highs and lows in their chosen line of work – what it is like to "kill" (make the audience laugh hard) and to "bomb."

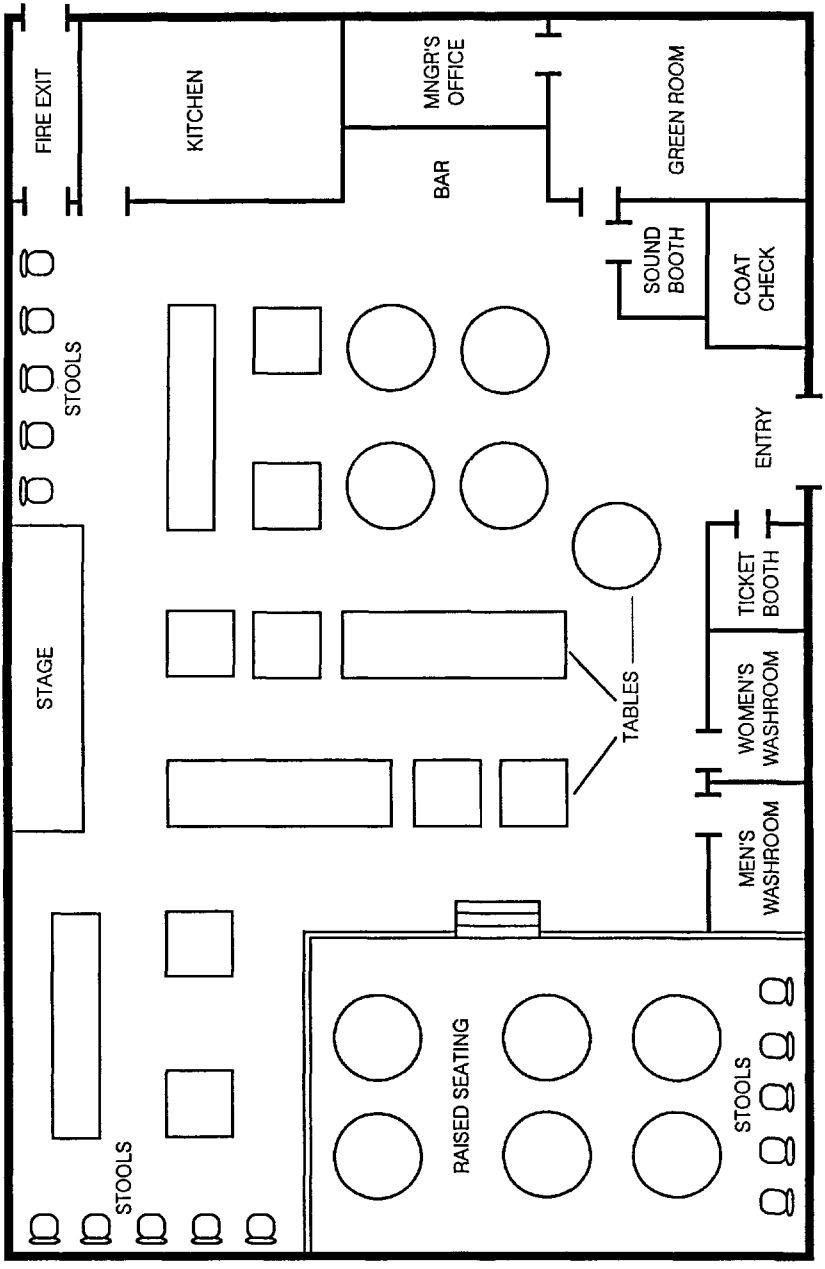
FOIBLES

Foibles is a fictitious club in Toronto, presented here as a typical setting for stand-up comedy in Canada. A number of exceptions to and variations on Foibles will be noted in this section and the next. Indeed, it will become evident that, with reference to some aspects of the comedy club, no place is typical.

Although Canadian comedy clubs legally hold anywhere from 100 to 300 patrons, Foibles can serve 190, the average capacity of all the clubs visited for this study. Most of the audience at Foibles is seated at tables in a rectangular-shaped room with the stage, as figure 2 indicates, centred on one of the long sides. This is the sort of room comics prefer, for it is difficult to play to people seated in an L-shaped space like Yuk Yuk's Uptown club in Toronto or in a deep and narrow room like Crackers, a now-defunct club in Hamilton.

Figure 2 depicts the floor plan of Foibles. All Canadian comedy rooms share its features, although each locates them differently and in a way that defies generalization. At Foibles seating is tightly packed around tables of various sizes and shapes and on stools along the walls. Density encourages the contagious

Figure 2
Floorplan of Foibles



spread of laughter and other emotions (Blumer 1975). The raised section is a common feature. Unlike Foibles, a few clubs also have booths.

Since no one in Canada has built a room specifically designed for stand-up, all existing rooms fall short of perfection. Ideally, the green room is just offstage so that performers need not walk through the audience, as at Yuk Yuk's in Hamilton. In reality, green rooms are located where space can be found. At the short-lived Le Fou rire in Montreal the green room was upstairs, at Yuk Yuk's Studio in Toronto, in the basement. Perhaps the best green room in the country, for many reasons, is the one at the Vancouver Punchlines. It is just back of the stage for easy access yet far enough away from it that comics may talk among themselves without disturbing the audience out front. It is large enough to hold two couches, a few chairs, and a television set.

Frequently less than ideal, from the standpoint of comics, are "the sight lines." If rooms can be too long and narrow, they can also be too wide and possibly shallow. In the latter case comics must turn nearly 180 degrees to make eye contact with the whole audience. Moreover, the best comedy, like the best conversation, is carried out with a frontal view of the speaker and thus of all his or her facial expressions and gestures. At the Vancouver Punchlines and the Yuk Yuk's in Hamilton performers and management alike must work around four massive pillars, whereas at Windsor's Komedy Korner and the Yuk Yuk's in Edmonton, the two to three slender columns pose little problem.

Decor

Foibles has a plain interior. Its black walls and ceiling direct attention toward the stage and help create a sense of density, an environment of contagion. Black and white show business photos hung here and there do little to alter this subtle persuasion. As plain are the tables, chairs (not too comfortable), stools, flooring, and lighting, which simultaneously lower management costs and focus attention on the stage rather than the sensory environment.

Many comics believe that a posh decor discourages uproarious laughter, the kind they long to generate and the kind their audiences remember when they leave. And a posh interior is felt to clash with the antiestablishment humour and general iconoclasm of modern stand-up comedy.

Before showtime the lighting in Foibles is similar to that of most other nightclubs. A minute or so before the emcee makes an appearance, however, the room is plunged into darkness while the stage is flooded with light from overhead. The audience now has little choice but to concentrate on the front of the room.

To the comics who play here, Foibles, despite its rather small and less than ideally situated green room, has a good feel about it. Here they have the intimacy they need for the production of good comedy. Here the sight lines, though marred by a few posts, are enhanced by the room's ideal height, width, and depth. Here the decor tells the audience to stop talking and watch and listen to the show. Foibles is a treat to work in, and, as a result, frequently produces "good nights" for those who call stand-up comedy their vocation or avocation.

A SHOW AT FOIBLES

Shows at Foibles are typical of those presented in Canadian comedy clubs. Let us consider the first show Saturday night. Patrons begin arriving an hour or so before it starts, pay a cover charge of seven dollars (occasionally adjusted to compete with the cost of local cinemas, and sit down to a round or two of drinks, perhaps a snack from the kitchen. Popular recorded music mingles with cigarette smoke and conversation. The very informality of the room along with the liquor, soon reduces the inhibitions of patrons as they wait for showtime.

Then, at eight-thirty, the house lights are suddenly turned off and the stage lights turned on. A blast of Foibles' theme music forces an end to all conversation. Attention automatically focuses on the small stage, where there is a microphone and a stool silhouetted against a bare black wall. Shortly the emcee strides on and taking the mike from its stand greets the crowd: "Good evening ladies and gentlemen. I'm Ed Farley, your host for tonight. It's great to see such a big crowd. Where are you all from?" The names of a handful of towns and cities are heard from around the room.

"You're from Winnipeg," Ed says. "What are you doing here in Toronto?"

"Oh, we're just here to shop."

"To shop? Why? Don't you have any stores in Winnipeg?" The audience chuckles. "And where are you from, sir?" The man questioned toys nervously with his drink. "Come on," Ed teases,

"you can give me an answer. This is not a little question. I'm not asking you about the size of your dick. You must be from some place." The audience is clearly enjoying this interrogation.

"I'm from Buffalo," he says reluctantly.

"Oh, no wonder you didn't want to say anything. How did you wind up in Buffalo – win the booby prize at your company's annual Christmas draw?" The man laughs, but refuses to answer the question. "You'd have been better off with the turkey," Ed observes, and then turns his attention to another part of the room.

"And here we have a table of all women and no men. What's the matter girls, did the computer-dating service screw up again?"

"No," one of them replies. "We're celebrating Sharon's birthday."

"Oh, really, and how old are you Sharon?" Sharon giggles, but offers no answer. "What's the matter," Ed continues, "is the question too difficult?"

"She's twenty-two," one of the others volunteers, "and ..." She is cut-off in midsentence by Ed, who abruptly addresses a group at another table whose conversation is turning loud.

"I would like to remind you gentlemen that this is Foibles Comedy Club where open masturbation is prohibited." The audience howls and jeers.

"Why is that?" one of them inquires.

"Because Foibles wants to help control the spread of venereal disease."

"Then how come they let you in?" responds the heckler.

"Look pal, they're very charitable here. They feel even Neanderthals like you deserve entertainment." Laughter drowns out an attempted riposte, and Ed, who feels he has the crowd on his side, launches into a short monologue on dogs and cats.

Ten minutes Later, having sufficiently "worked" the room, he says, "Are you ready for our first act?" There is applause and a chorus of yeses. "Great! Put your hands together for Micky Finn, a very funny guy from Ottawa." With this introduction, Farley leaves the stage just as Finn mounts it. Finn sets his glass of beer on the stool, takes the mike from its stand, and begins to pace.

"I was reading in the *Star* [Toronto] the other day that we must try harder to supply teenagers with condoms. Can't you just see it at the fast-food places, the girl behind the counter asks for his order and the customer says, 'I'll take two McCondom burgers and a large fries. And give me plenty of that special sauce; I like my McCondoms prelubricated!'" Finn continues with

the condom monologue for nearly five minutes, then moves on to dating relations and finally closes with a commentary about Doctor Ruth's syndicated newspaper column on sexual problems.

As Finn leaves the stage, Farley returns. "Let's have a big round of applause for Micky Finn, a fine young comic." There is more clapping, after which Farley begins a monologue on one of his pet peeves: local driving habits. Five minutes later he announces the next act: "Tonight we are privileged to have Peggy Donacetti with us, a terrific comedienne from Victoria. Give her a big welcome!"

Donacetti opens her thirty-minute set with a monologue about herself and her boyfriend: "He makes me so mad at times. He's always trying to fondle me in public. One of these days I'm going to buy one of those little round buzzers you get at the joke shops and put it in my bra." The audience roars, and as the effect of the punchline wears off, Donacetti skilfully follows up with the tag line: "If that doesn't stop him, I'm going to drop one in his pants and grab *him.*"

Several minutes later she slides into a monologue about her life as a child and her relationship with her parents. "Yes, my boyfriend reminds me a lot of my father." Having established this link she tells the way her father ruled the roost with strict Italian discipline. "If I wanted to go out on a date, I had to sign out when I left and sign in when I returned.

"How many of you girls out there grew up in a family where your first name and 'dishwasher' meant the same thing?"

"Oh, that happened to me all the time," responds a young woman from a table near the stage. She and Donacetti exchange a few lines on their experiences with this unpleasant duty. After two additional monologues, Donacetti closes with her view on sports. "Hockey is so boring. I bring my knitting just to keep from going to sleep. I make scarves for the cute players; they look so cold out there. Good night folks, I hope you enjoyed the show."

Farley reappears onstage, this time for only a few minutes. He knows the crowd wants to hear the headliner, Toronto comic Joel Slivitz, and that Slivitz's one-hour act will bring the show to nearly two hours. After two hours or so, most stand-up comedy audiences are laughed out.

Slivitz is an entertainment veteran. Seven years at the mike have taught him a great deal about how to attract and hold a variety of audiences. His material is more original than that of the junior colleagues preceding him. They dealt with subjects

often discussed by other comics, sometimes using stock lines. With experience they, too, will rely less on these crutches.

Slivitz's monologues are long and he inserts smooth transitions between each. At one point, for instance, he goes into a lengthy commentary on elevators in public buildings and the people who use them. This moves gradually to talk about escalators in general, then to those at Eaton's in Toronto, where he buys his slacks. This is the occasion for a piece about buying and trying on slacks and being fitted by a clerk. Slivitz does a stereotyped vocal and physical imitation of the homosexual who serves him:

"Pleath thpread your legth a bit so that I can methure the intheem. Oh dear! It bulgth too much at the crotch."

"Of course if bulges there," snorts Slivitz. "What do you think I am, a eunuch?"

"Oh, definitely not, thir," the clerk smiles. "I mean, the panth are too baggy there and that 'th why they bulgth tho much. Here, let me thow you."

"Keep your hands off me. I like the bulge, thank you very much. The more the better."

At another point in his act, Slivitz dwells on the advantages and disadvantages of leftovers at home. This leads, in turn, to a monologue about being Jewish: "I refused to go with my friends on their first trip to see a prostitute, because I couldn't get her services wholesale." And then Slivitz ends his act, as all entertainers strive to, with a powerful display of talent. His is an impression of the prime minister that leaves the crowd roaring and clapping as he leaves the stage.

Ed Farley returns. "Let's hear it again for our headliner, Joel Slivitz," he says. Enthusiastic applause. Once calm is restored, Ed announces that the show has come to an end. "You've been a great audience. Be sure to tip your waitress. If you don't she'll have me pee in your drink the next time you're here. And, if you're drunk and going to drive, hang around awhile and give us sober folks a headstart for home. Good night all."

Variations

The show at Foibles is reasonably typical, but to complete our conception of Canadian stand-up comedy there are several variations to note. At Foibles and many other clubs, the order of shows and acts varies from day to day. Depending on the room, amateurs perform on Mondays, Tuesdays, or Wednesdays in five-

to ten-minute sets. These evenings are emceed by a professional, and the headliner for the week sometimes provides twenty minutes or so of entertainment at the end of the show. There is one show on Thursdays with the same structure as the weekend shows. On Fridays and Saturdays two shows are offered, often eight-thirty and eleven-thirty. The sequence of opening, middle, and headliner acts, or spots, as they are sometimes called, is uncommon in the United States. There shows ordinarily begin with a long set by the emcee, which is followed by the middle and headliner acts. And in Montreal junior amateurs, be they anglophone or francophone, rarely get onstage. By the time they are performing in clubs and cabarets, they have achieved minimal professional status.

Comics soon learn what to expect on each of these nights. Amateur nights are usually sparsely patronized, whereas the Thursday crowd is normally larger. Weekend evenings often bring full houses. The second show Friday is expected to be problematic. Comics and club mangers hold that many audience members are tired from the week's work, drunk from celebrating the weekend, and out on the town with the "boys" or the "girls," that is, without a date or spouse. This leads to inordinate amounts of talking and heckling and a general listlessness. The group is difficult to control, a fact that we shall see is nevertheless vital for a successful set. Such conditions are usually absent on Saturday nights, which helps make them the best for comics. Now patrons, more physically and mental rested, are correspondingly more receptive to humour.

Of course, the acts themselves vary widely. Some comics start with a little audience banter, others engage in it from time to time throughout their act, and still others avoid it altogether. In general, emcees are expected to "go into the audience" more than featured performers, who, if they do too much of this, may be accused of killing time and not doing real comedy. As for hecklers, some comics ignore them, others like Farley deal with them promptly and severely. A few liven up their acts by leaving the stage to sample drinks, shake hands, and even look through purses. From the stage a comic may involve the audience in rhythmic clapping, unison responses, or an informal opinion poll. The latter is usually a set-up, for example, "How many men here have never cheated on their wives or girlfriends? Let's have a show of hands." With his wife or girlfriend seated beside him, the man has little choice but to indicate faithfulness. The comic observes to the remaining minority, "At least the rest of you guys are honest."

The francophone *comiques* of Quebec do much less of this. Their acts are presented in large theatres or halls from a high stage too distant from the public to allow extensive banter or participation. They operate more within the tradition of legitimate theatre where direct audience involvement of the sort just described is unheard of. Still, Jici Lauzon, *animateur* (emcee) for the 1988 Lundi juste pour rire, managed some audience banter at Club Soda from a large stage in a room twice the size of the largest comedy club.

Though typical stand-up comedy is verbal, a significant minority of anglophone comedians augment their words with such props as masks, hats, false noses, and musical instruments. Victoria comic John Johnson has built his acts around a bagpipe. Chris Lorne Elliott uses a mask and a pair of sunglasses to impersonate Elvis Presley. Cigarettes and sports jackets are frequently turned into accessories for an act, and may even be borrowed from someone in the audience.

One of the most widely used props is the microphone. Always hand-held, it can be removed from its stand to serve as a rope, a club, a penis (see Eddie Murphy's film *Raw*), an electric shaver, and so on. Kenny Robinson, a Yuk Yuk's headliner, briefly performs fellatio on it as part of his impersonation of Margaret Trudeau applying for a job. The mike is also widely used for sound effects, perhaps the most unusual example of which is Mark Denison's popular Punchlines impersonation of a steam iron.

Being closer to legitimate theatre, the Québécois *humoristes* perform more often than their anglophone counterparts with wigs, costumes, and makeup, perhaps along with props appropriate to the monologue they are enacting. Of the four types of *humoriste,* the *stand-up comiques* are the least likely to perform this way, but, even here, I would estimate that at present only a quarter of their acts are conducted in casual apparel (slacks and shirt, coat with or without tie, skirt and blouse, jeans and sweatshirt). To accommodate these tendencies, the first francophone comedy club, Le Fou rire, had a sizeable changing room and green room area not found in anglophone clubs.[1]

The Québécois comics also differ in their inclination to develop one or more *personnages* and build acts around them. *Personnages* are fictional characters representing types, not impersonated actual persons. There are many examples: Michel Barrette as Roland "Hee Haw" Tremblay, a Saguenay cowboy; Claire Jean as a bride; Clémence Desrochers as a hospital patient; Yvons Deschamps as Ti-Blanc Le Brun, a rustic Québécois of yesteryear; Serge Turbide as a tough motorcyclist; Marc Favreau as a tramp.

All the previously mentioned theatrical accompaniments are used in presenting the *personnage.*

Some anglophone performers recognize the difference between the presentation of self and the presentation of a *personnage* in the distinction they draw between comedian and comic. In their view, a *comedian* is like the Québécois *comique* – a *personnage* or stage persona who speaks mostly in the first person and delivers the viewpoint of another through the medium of humour. Theatrical accompaniments help create a living persona. By contrast, a *comic* is a humourous writer whose aim is laughter. He or she narrates – often in the third person – jokes, short monologues, and one-liners. Most Québécois *comiques* are comedians, most modern anglophone stand-up performers are comics. A few anglophones do deliver a mixture of the two types.[2] The majority of respondents in this study were comics, not comedians, hence my preference for the former term.

To turn to another variation, amateurs and opening-act professionals such as Micky Finn are more likely to sprinkle their acts with one-liners and street jokes than those who have advanced to the status of middle act and headliner. But even the latter are not beyond the occasional use of these time-worn components of stand-up comedy. If properly presented, they can be sidesplitting. It is overuse, weak presentation, or poor placement within the act that marks the neophyte.

Variation is also evident in the use of stock lines, many of them "heckler lines" used to control recalcitrant members of the audience. Only junior comics rely heavily on stock lines. Still, the veteran may draw on an old heckler line (such as, "There are four million sperm in a human ejaculation and this one winds up in my show") to put down and, it is hoped, silence an obstreperous male patron. Or to bring a female heckler to heel: "Look honey, knock it off. I don't come and bounce on the bed when you're working." The high-quality performances of veterans, who project poise and authority onstage, reduce the tendency to heckle.

Junior comics are inclined to build their acts around subjects frequently worked over by other comics. Among the most popular are sex, genitalia, children, parents, dogs and cats, drugs and alcohol, male-female relationships, and the opposite sex. Top comics, if they use such themes at all, do so in an original way.

Another variation involves the proportion of "dirty" material in an act. Young and relatively inexperienced comics are more likely to rely on blue material than older and experienced col-

leagues. Women generally use less blue material then men. But even within these categories there is considerable variation. Some audiences (those that are young and largely male) seem to like dirty acts, whereas others (those at convention hospitality suites) prefer clean acts with no more than implicit references to the indecent.

There are comics who use a hook at one or more points in their acts. Slivitz did this with his Jewishness, a common reference in the acts of Jewish performers. Gordon Paynter of Brantford, Ontario, centres most of his act on his blindness. British comic Simon Fanshaw appears onstage in a pink coat and tie to accentuate his homosexuality. Blacks frequently use their race as a hook. However, racial and ethnic hooks are rare among Canadian comics, who are predominantly white and of European descent. Peggy Donacetti might speak of her Italian father, but that is not a hook.

Finally, performances vary in the amount of sexist material they contain. This is different from the comic talking about sex from his or her experience. Sexism is the use of demeaning, stereotyped images and language in monologues about the other sex. Male comics are far more inclined to be sexist than their female counterparts. A man might develop a scenario about women craving sex or spreading gossip. In the past, male performers profited mightily from jokes about dumb blonds and women drivers. Today, only a minority of male comics are sexist.

A certain repartee is evident in Canadian clubs as female comics go on the offensive against sexist colleagues. They do this less with reverse sexism (two wrongs do not make a right) than with clever premises that show them to be the smarter or more powerful of the two categories of humankind. Meg Soper, a Vancouver headliner, works for a few minutes on the stock theme of the wet spot that appears on the sheets during intercourse. To settle the score with male comics who make jokes about forcing their girlfriends to sleep on it, Soper promises that the next time her boyfriend tries that, she's going to deny him further opportunity to make those spots.

THE ART OF STAND-UP COMEDY

It has been claimed both in this book and in the industry that stand-up is an art. What, specifically, is meant by this claim? Let us start by looking at Thomas Munro's (1957, 45) definition of art. He notes that a product need not be beautiful or otherwise

meritorious to be identified as art. For him, art includes one or more of three skills:

1. Making or doing something used or intended for use as a stimulus for a satisfactory aesthetic experience. Aspects of this experience may include beauty, pleasantness, interest, and emotion
2. Expressing and communicating past emotional and other experience, both individual and social
3. Designing, composing, and performing through personal interpretation, as distinguished from routine execution or mechanical reproduction.

The artistic part of stand-up is making people laugh. In so doing, stand-up meets Munro's three criteria. It takes skill to write comic lines that are pleasant, interesting, emotional, or a combination of all three. It takes skill to communicate through humour one's past experiences, whether emotional or not. Finally, it takes skill to perform lines in such a way that the audience laughs.

Writing Lines

A comic searching for new material must first come up with a premise, theme, or subject around which to develop a descriptive monologue of, say, five minutes. Slivitz worked up a monologue around behaviour in elevators and escalators; Donacetti, around her life as a child. In present-day stand-up comedy, the premise is plucked from the everyday experiences and observations of the author, usually as these involve some mishap, person, animal, predicament, or misunderstanding. The new-wave comics of the 1960s and early 1970s were inclined to find their premises in the moral and political spheres. The modern performer finds material as he or she shops, watches television, reads the newspaper, walks around town, attends a concert, drives somewhere, takes an airplane flight, and so on. There is rarely a deep message or sharp controversy today, only pure entertainment, an observation that holds for francophone comedy as well (Germain 1988). The comic has a "concept" or "conception" of the premise as, in some way, humourous and worth developing into a monologue.

Writing lines is one of the most difficult aspects of stand-up. Without fail, every respondent commented on how hard it is to

come up with even one line that consistently draws laughs from a range of patrons. "It takes a month to get five minutes of good material," groaned one. Like the playwright, the comic must carefully choose his words, their place in the sentence, and the punctuation that guides their eventual delivery onstage. Like any other author, the comic must rewrite several times to create an effective line. Indeed, he or she may shelve a line (and a premise) six to twelve months or more because nothing can be found that works. Clearly, theories of humour play little or no role in the creative process behind stand-up comedy (e.g., McGhee and Goldstein 1984).

Today's descriptive monologues are composed of a sequence of jokes that experienced comics bring together in a coherent act. Like the street joke, the monologue joke has a standard three-part structure. It begins with the setup, a description of the scene of action – for the comic recognizes that things are funny only within certain contexts (Pollio 1978). In the middle some sort of action unfolds within this context. And then the punchline, or payoff, terminates the action. A tag line, or secondary payoff, may be added by the performer (or, rarely, by an audience member) as a sort of entertainment bonus (see Donacetti's tag earlier). A comedy veteran presenting a joke with a long middle (Al Clouston's "Dere's nutin' wrong wid dat b'y") will supply humour throughout this section to keep attention for the eventual punchline. Certainly the skill and ingenuity this requires exceeds that which goes into stock heckler lines, where the three parts of the joke are contained in one or two sentences.

Of course, some comics buy jokes from a gag writer. Some incorporate street jokes into their acts, steal from colleagues, rely on stock lines, or get lines from a friend. But as a performer gains experience and develops a distinctive style, the tendency is to write more and more of his or her own "stuff." As a career peaks, demand may be so great that a star must hire one or more writers to maintain a repertoire of new material (see Germain 1988). Bob Hope is said to have six writers, five men and one woman (*Calgary Herald* 1987, E5).

Types of Humour

Social scientists have identified four types of humour according to its consequences (effects) or function it serves (Martineau 1972, Stebbins 1979a). These are consensus, control, conflict, and comic relief.

When humour creates *consensus* among people, it generates a warm feeling of friendliness and good cheer. Usually the subject of such humour is generalized, or there is no subject at all. At any rate, no listener feels embarrassed or becomes, as a result of the humour, sympathetic toward its subject. Consider a typical street joke:

"There are advantages and disadvantages to this property," said the honest real estate agent. "To the north is the gas works, to the east a glue factory, to the south a fish and chip shop, and to the west a sewage farm. Those are the disadvantages."

"What are the advantages?" asked the prospective buyer.

"You can always tell which way the wind is blowing," said the agent.

Or:

Mrs Trent, seated in her living room, heard the back door slam. Thinking it was her young son, she called, "I'm in here, darling, I've been waiting for you." There was no answer for a moment. Then a strange voice faltered, "I'm sorry, but I ain't your regular milkman."

The *control* consequence comes about through ridicule, satire, sarcasm, and other expressions of annoyance. Humour serves here to change behaviour identified by the comic as undesirable. For example: A perturbed husband once observed to his horticulturist wife who had covered the house in greenery "Look, get rid of some of these house plants or this place will be re-zoned from residential to light jungle." One can also see an element of control in the following short joke:

A father was berating his son who was reluctant to do his homework. "When Abraham Lincoln was your age," the father lectured, "he walked 10 miles to school every day and then studied by the light of the fire in his log cabin."

"So what?" the boy rejoined. "When John Kennedy was your age, he was President!"

Humour whose consequence is *conflict* is actually an act of aggression. It is the verbal equivalent of a punch in the nose, an insult. Commonly it is expressed by political and related subjects. For example: "No wonder stamps are so expensive," grumbled one householder at the slow delivery of mail these days. "Nowadays, you're not just paying for delivery, but also

for storage." Political figures may also be attacked. A particularly vicious example is John Randolph's simile for Edward Livingstone: "He is a man of splendid abilities, but utterly corrupt. Like a rotten mackerel by moonlight, he shines and stinks."

Our fourth form of humour brings *comic relief* from some kind of tense situation – interpersonal relations for example, or unbroken concentration on an important task. One of the best examples I have been able to collect comes from a theatre group, which was rehearsing William Inge's play "Dark at the Top of the Stairs." The players were upset about the difficulty the lead was having in learning the line "walks in wearing a suit of fine tailored clothes ..." Twice one night he tried to say it correctly; the man in question was "wearing a fine suit of tailored clothes" and then, after another attempt, was "wearing a tailored suit of fine clothes." Finally, with a gesture of exasperation, the lead announced, "I'm cutting that line – he simply walks in with a fat cigar." The cast broke out laughing, which dispelled the mounting tension. The lead, by the way, wound up using that cigar line in performances.

Most of the stand-up comedy I observed, both anglophone and francophone, was of the consensus variety, or at least, was intended as such. Consensus helps give comedy its distinctive conversational quality. But the pet peeves of comics and their audiences encourage occasional control and conflict humour. The covert or overt anger lends the flavour of a diatribe. As at a party, a diatribe can be very funny – consider the humourous insult – but it dilutes the spirit of bonhomie. The monologues of many comics in the late 1950s and the 1960s contained control and conflict humour, for example, those of Lenny Bruce and Dick Gregory. Heckler lines and other insults delivered to the audience by some of today's comics (especially emcees) indicate that this kind of humour is still with us. The present study suggests that the proportion has changed, however, with consensus humour now the most prevalent.

Further research may reveal a profound reason for this shift. It is possible that anger overpowers humour in a single joke or monologue. If someone is mad and saying funny things at the same time, it is the anger that dominates. The listener concentrates less on the humour, which nonetheless requires considerable concentration to be understood.

Modern comics (those after about 1975) appear to have discovered this principle. Many I observed doing "angry" humour were mocking, conveying to the audience that personally they

were not angry at all but merely playing the role. Yuk Yuk's performer Ron Vaudry performs this sort of humour. With it he seems to escape emotional clashes.[3]

Experience

By drawing on experience, emotional and otherwise, stand-up comics express artistic skill and also link their personalities with their material. They conjure up humourous incongruities – unusual ways of viewing everyday life – and use subjects of almost universal appeal: personal problems (money, sex, relationships) or routine experiences (pets, elevators, motorists).[4] The incongruities are organized around a broader concept and richly described in language designed to make people laugh. Finn's flight of imagination about McCondom burgers plays on the theme of condom availability; Donacetti's about dropping the buzzer in her boyfriend's pants draws on boyfriend-girlfriend relations. And then there is the blend of experience and incongruity in the following monologue presented by Charlie, a female comic in Erika Ritter's play "Automatic Pilot" (1980, 96–7):

Hey ladies, there's a big vogue now in younger men. You noticed that? I don't know about you, but I don't want to go out to dinner with someone who has to ask the waiter to bring him the Child's Menu. Okay, okay, so the kid CAN come ten times in a single night. So what? It's always over so quickly, right? It's like getting ten episodes of *Leave it to Beaver* – right in a row.

It beats the old guys, though. A session with your average older man is like a screening of *The Sorrow and the Pity.* Only longer and sadder. You nod off two or three times, and wake up, and he's STILL at it. "I almost came that time," he says. Eventually, you start trying to outfox him, right? "You came," you tell him. "You definitely came. It's just been so long you've forgotten what it's like. But that was it. Trust me. Now can we get some sleep?"

But the real bitch about younger men is how goddam earnest they are. One roll in the hay, and they're ready to move in – provided you're willing to help them with their algebra. And when you say, "Hey, wait a minute, sonny—" (She falters on the name, breaks off for a moment, and then, almost to herself) Sonny. (Long, baffled pause, then she plunges on, almost desperately) No, No, I prefer to stick to single guys my own age. Hey, has anybody SEEN any single straight guys lately? You know they're an endangered species. (Gradually regaining composure) In fact, I heard recently a woman was picketed on

Bloor Street [Toronto] by the Greenpeace people for wearing a coat made of the pelts of single straight men.

To help develop a sense of the incongruous, Larry Horowitz offers the following advice to the amateurs he coaches at Yuk Yuk's: "A good comedy writer has lateral vision. S/He is able to look at a common situation and see it from an uncommon angle. A normal person, or 'non-com,' can look at something a thousand times, and never really notice what a comic does. We are their eyes into the twisted over-view or under-view of life. We help them talk about stuff they might not dare, with words they wouldn't think to use."[5]

To draw on experience and write it into an effective monologue comics must develop a sense of what amuses an audience. They must place themselves in the position of the typical spectator and from there view the proposed humour. Such an ability varies widely among people (Stryker 1962, Kinch 1963), which helps account for the success of some performers and the relative failure of others.

For comics, role-taking is always a trial-and-error process. Although the veteran is far more capable than the amateur of writing a line that works from the start, all performers profit when they try new lines on a live audience. They experiment with their acts – adding a word here or a pause there, resequencing sections of a monologue and monologues within an act, using different gestures or voice inflections, omitting a prop, and so on until they hit a combination that consistently works.

Personal Interpretation

The comic's act onstage is, at bottom, his or her interpretation of written lines. These are memorized and presented as though improvised. Although most performers deliver lines in a conversational manner, there is still much about a presentation that is theatrical. With some notable exceptions, seasoned professionals are more inclined to be theatrical than amateurs and junior professionals, incorporating a variety of movements (stage business) into their acts. Professionals bend over, gesture here, light a cigarette there, manipulate the microphone, bump it with their head (which makes a loud pop), pace in this direction or that, turn their backs momentarily, and the like. These actions are designed to augment the humour of certain lines.

The same can be said for pronounced voice inflection, also a

variable, and more common among experienced than inexperienced performers. A shout, laugh, grunt, whisper, squeal, crescendo can complement spoken words. Good comedy also has rhythm, which requires extensive practice.

The importance of the pause in vocal presentation is well known and understood by successful comics. "All good comedians learn to wait until the laughter has just peaked out and is beginning to fall into rapid decline before delivering their next line. This causes the audience to suppress the tail-end of their laugh in order to hear what comes next, though the residual mirth is carried through silently to cumulate with the subsequent 'official' laugh" (Wilson 1985, 58). Pauses build suspense and tension, they keep the audience raptly attuned to the script, they allow laughter to die away sufficiently so that the comic may benefit fully from the humour to follow. Especially important is the pause that enables the middle phase of the joke to sink in before the comic delivers his or her punchline. The true artist has learned not only when to pause, but also for how long and what gestures to make, if any, during this brief space in time. All this is called timing, a widely discussed technique among stand-up comics. In short, personal interpretation is vitally important in modern stand-up. Many performers argue that ninety percent of their artistry lies here.

Whatever the proportion, the artistry of today's stand-up comedy bears a strong resemblance to the skill of Mark Twain's lectures a century ago:

> He did pile up adjectives. His long sentences grew less by multiple parentheses – he was no Henry James – than by phrases and clauses introduced by "and." The loose, conversational structure, at the opposite extreme from conventional oratory, puzzled listeners throughout his career. Puzzling also was his negligent "address," as unconcerned as a loafer's on the courthouse square. No front, no starchiness, but an assumed air of seriousness, even of sanctimony. The low voice was a handicap, but it was so natural that apparently he never tried very hard to change it. Added to these eccentricities was a slow delivery, once described as words "separated as if there were a two-em quad between them." His lecturing technique was so unorthodox that it sometimes provoked querulous vexation.
>
> In one way his method was first-rate, for he had learned to dispense with a manuscript, and to rely only on brief notes jotted on small slips of paper. From the start he adopted an admirable rule: a lecture should be spoken, as if spontaneously, not read. So he memorized a

manuscript, then gave it so artfully that more than one critic believed he was speaking impromptu. As a reporter once said: "The jokes are uttered as if he had just thought of them a minute before, and didn't perceive the point of them quite as soon as the audience." Furthermore, having rehearsed orally, he knew the speaking time to the minute, hence never made the common mistake of taking twice as much time as he had been allotted. In these ways he was a model speaker. (Fatout 1960, 91–2)

Twain's style was highly unusual in his day, an observation that supports the proposition that he was the first stand-up comic.

Twain did deliver his lectures in a way that is uncommon today. He would drawl out his lines, whereas the modern comic typically delivers his more quickly and with a great deal of energy. Lines are presented with enthusiasm, punchlines at a rapid but intelligible pace.[6] Such a quality seldom undermines the conversational tone, though it does suggest an animated exchange among people excited about what they are saying.

This brief discussion of comedic interpretation brings out the limitations of our description of the show at Foibles. That description touches on the art of writing lines from experience but conveys little about the visual and aural components of the typical performance. For that, one must go to a comedy club.

THE ESSENTIAL AUDIENCE

There can be no stand-up comedy without an audience. I am not referring here to the fact that the audience ultimately pays the comic and thereby enables him or her to make a living from comedy. Rather I mean that interaction with the audience is an essential part of the comic's act. The performer communicates jokes and sketches, the audience indicates, chiefly with laughter, whether they are funny. As noted, in the typical case the comic communicates in a conversational manner, using sweeping eye contact and a friendly demeanor while treating familiar subjects. The audience responds with smiles, chuckles, howls, applause, comments to one another and, occasionally, to the performer. From such cues the latter knows that he or she has hit on an effective set of lines and their delivery. Attentive faces, but no smiles or laughs, communicate something too. If laughter is expected under these conditions, then, unless the audience is somehow problematic (drunk, hostile), the comic knows that either the lines or their method of delivery or both

must be reworked. In the audience, extended conservation, and attention to people, actions, and objects around the room signal boredom.

Some Flop Factors

An artistically strong act may still flop because of certain events or conditions in the room. Some audiences, usually not those in comedy clubs, are present for reasons other than to hear comedy. They might have come to watch a televised hockey game which an imprudent manager has switched off so the comic could perform. Sometimes comics work for an evening at a nightclub that features dancing as an occasion for single adults to meet. The performer is often seen as obstructing these more important goals.

Here a professional respondent looks back on his worst "hell gig":

> The weirdest gig I ever had ... was in Vancouver ... It was like 40 dollars to do a hairdressing convention. They had a nice stage, table, and microphone set up for me. But whoever thought of hiring a comedian in the first place, I have no idea. Then they changed everything. "Why not come into the judging room and do your stuff there?" Now I have no microphone, and there's six people, six models sitting down with aprons on and their hair done up. They can't move or laugh. They just have to sit there, and I do my show. There were kids running around and hair-dressers and about twenty other people who couldn't figure out why I was there. I began to wonder too. Then I had to give away the door prizes. That's why the rooms are the only places where you can just do your stuff. (Interview with author)

Stags can become equally horrific when, for example, tables are served by scantily clad waitresses, a stripper or two circulates through the rooms, poker games are under way, or drunken exchanges break out. Understanding humour requires concentration. It is no wonder that comics prefer club rooms.

A weak sound system, rare in comedy clubs, does not help. Poorly designed rooms with a noisy or conspicuous bar, several large posts, or distractions from an adjacent room can contribute to a flop. These factors and others only exacerbate such unavoidable distractions as waitresses serving tables and patrons traipsing off to the restrooms.

To be sure, no act appeals to all audiences. Most comics are

city people whose background is chiefly urban. Comedy clubs are located in medium-sized and large cities. Acts designed to succeed here sometimes fare poorly in small cities surrounded by a large rural hinterland. Mike McDonald's monologue about driving a Honda Civic on a metropolitan expressway crowded with trucks and cars would make little sense in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, or Moncton, New Brunswick. In such places the comic must use different material.

And, as Montreal *humoriste* and *animateur* Yvons Deschamps observed in an interview for this study, different segments of the audience laugh at different lines presented by a particular comic. Research in social psychology demonstrates that men tend to laugh more often than women at aggressive and sexual humour (Groch 1974), whereas women are more amused by the absurd (Brodzinsky et al. 1981). The performer is successful if he or she can make a sizeable proportion of the audience laugh. Some comics have noticed that men and women laugh at different places in their acts. One respondent said he gets the most attention and laughter from women when he talks about his girlfriend. In general, men laugh more often and more heartily at the blue material, although this does depend somewhat on the audience. At least one comic has observed that patrons may look at their dates for cues about whether to laugh at a joke.

Moreover, the appearance, bearing, and sex of the comic can affect audience reception to his or her humour. If the audience prefers macho male performers, then a woman or a more effeminate man will draw attention to themselves and away from their monologues. Such is the preference at the type of satellite room known as the biker bar. The homosexual comedian Simon Fanshaw would likely be given a hard time in such a place and find that his lines drew little laughter. However, when I observed him at Yuk Yuk's urbane Yorkville club in Toronto, he was a complete success.

Unwanted Interaction

Consensus humour in particular encourages interaction with the humorist. It does so in three ways: (1) When successful, it suggests a willingness on the part of the comic to associate with the audience. The conversational tone abets this tendency. (2) It tells the audience that the performer has a friendly, good-natured disposition and is not angry. (3) It establishes a sense of equality between comic and audience. Status differences be-

tween the patrons and the featured performer, the centre of attention, are momentarily overridden by the experience of laughing together.

Unfortunately, most comics do not want spontaneous remarks, questions, and heckling from their audiences (known as calling out). Intrusions interrupt their carefully planned timing, wording, and rhythm. It is like throwing ink onto a painting; the art is destroyed. In comedy when continuity between the set-up and the middle is interrupted, it destroys the punchline. The comic's dilemma therefore is how to deliver a conversational monologue while discouraging responses from the audience. Experienced entertainers know how to make the best of unwanted interaction, for example, by getting two patrons to argue with each other and then assuming the role of referee, a good stance from which to improvise some additional humour.

Comics call this problem control, something that bothers line comics less than monologuists and stand-up comics. Control is partly achieved through audience socialization. Patrons learn from each other and from experience in comedy clubs that active vocal participation is unwelcome. With comedy rooms establishing themselves as a form of urban entertainment, we can expect a more sophisticated clientele in this regard. In the meantime, club managers often announce the norm of nonparticipation prior to the show. For instance: "Welcome to Foibles and an evening of terrific comedy entertainment. To enjoy our show to the fullest, we ask that you keep your talking to a minimum and your laughing and applause to a maximum. And now here is your host of the evening, Ed Farley." When neither socialization nor announcement works and someone gets out of hand, the manager often evicts the offender. By this point, however, a certain amount of damage has already been done.

Certainly these sources of control are helpful. But veteran comics also have their own controls. One is the electronically amplified voice, against which it is difficult for patrons to compete. Talking with energy and enthusiasm is a form of domination in its own right. The same may be said for eye contact and the other principles of good conversation. Of course, the conversational norm of turn taking – one lets the other person have his or her say before responding – must be avoided. The comic raises fewer hackles with the mundane and familiar then with an emotion-laden topic such as political preference or the abortion controversy. By sticking with the former, one controls the audience's desire to respond.

Another control available to the comic is talking with confidence and authority. One presents oneself as a formidable target for people who want to call out. Being likeable also appears to reduce heckling, although a likeable comic may inadvertently encourage a comment or question from the audience about what was just said. Some comics control all interventions by ignoring them, as if nothing had been said. Others acknowledge commentary with a brief thank you or "There you are" or, if they are confident, perhaps with a brief impromptu exchange. Still another strategy is to politely but firmly remind the offender of comedy club etiquette. Subsequent offenses can bring harsher reactions from the stage, such as "Will you shut up?"

The heckler line is the comic's most powerful weapon, and it is frequently brandished. The weapon, perhaps even some lines themselves, appears to have been borrowed from one prominent predecessor of the stand-up performer, the strip comic (Salutin 1973). The heckler line is almost always an insult and commonly obscene. The hope is that it will silence the target through embarrassment (most likely to succeed if the audience laughs heartily) and defeat – a sense of having been outdone by someone of superior wit. If a series of heckler lines fails to work and a contest still more detrimental to the show develops, a responsible manager will step in and evict or threaten to evict the offending person. This measure is most likely to be employed during the second show on Fridays, when audience recalcitrance often peaks.

Amateurs have to put up with more of this sort of thing than professionals do. Amateur night (sometimes called new talent night) is a time in comedy clubs when management seems inclined toward a policy of nonintervention. It is believed that amateurs need to know in clear terms when their acts have bombed. Heckling pours salt in the wound inflicted by an absence of laughter after a punchline. There is no escaping the implication of such blurted remarks as "Your five minutes are up" or "Don't quit your day job."

The problem of hecklers and commenters, by the way, is next to nonexistent in Québécois stand-up comedy. Its theatre-like presentation in a large hall discourages spontaneous audience participation. Advanced francophone amateurs also tend to avoid the problem, since they are brought along through a system of talent finding and development such as the festival Juste pour rire.

With or without unwanted audience participation, however,

the comic's lot is not an easy one. A question often asked by the general public is why anyone would want to pursue stand-up. The answer, in simplest terms, is that most everyone likes to make others laugh. How do stand-up comics turn this into an occupational career?

CHAPTER FOUR

So You Think You're Funny

Chapters 4 through 6 centre on the career of the stand-up comic and the social contexts in which this career unfolds, namely, the comedy club and "the road." In the course of these chapters we will move back and forth among three perspectives: a sociological perspective on the comic's career, an empirical perspective on interview data, and an ethnographic perspective on life in clubs and on the road.

THE CAREER PERSPECTIVE

In entertainment, a career is the passage of a person through stages that carry him or her into and through amateur status and possibly on to professional status. The career includes adjustments made to, and interpretations made of, the contingencies and turning points encountered in each stage. We are accustomed to thinking of career continuity as the accumulation of rewards and prestige. But continuity can also involve retrogression. In entertainment, as in some other vocations, people may reach performance peaks after which prestige and rewards diminish as the limelight shifts to younger, sometimes more capable performers.

Continuity in a career can be viewed from two perspectives: (1) from the chronological, descriptive, objective view, which sees the career unfolding over the years for the typical performer in one kind of popular art; or (2) from the subjective view, that of the performer. The subjective view interprets what has happened, is happening, and will happen to the performer at various times during his or her life as an entertainer.

Most career histories have five stages: beginning, development,

establishment, maintenance, and decline.[1] The comics in this study have not been employed in their occupation long enough to have reached the point of decline which, in any case, is by no means inevitable in entertainment. Hence that stage will not be discussed, even though famous cases of it have been described in the popular literature on comics.[2] In this chapter, we explore the first stage in connection with Canadian stand-up.

At each stage of a career the comic encounters special contingencies – unforeseen events, processes, or situations that lie beyond his or her control. Career contingencies emanate from changes in the comic's artistic environment or personal life or a combination of these two. The career is affected, negatively or positively, by contingencies.

The idea of subjective career refers to the comic's recognition and interpretation of events – past, present, and future – that are associated with his or her role as an entertainer (Stebbins 1970). Especially important in an analysis of the subjective side of career is the individual's interpretation of the turning points he or she has encountered or expects to encounter – whether they are marks of progression or decline.

From the subjective view, a turning point is a juncture at which the comic sees the nature or direction of his or her career as having changed significantly. The comics in this study tended to define turning points as the critical events and decisions they were involved in as adults; seldom did they search their adolescent and childhood years to identify turning points. In other words, most of the events shaping their entertainment career occurred from the development stage onward. Certain contingencies were interpreted by the respondents as turning points. Other events were turning points but were being caused and controlled to a significant degree by the comics themselves. Some turning points, then, are contingent; some are not.

SOME EARLY PERSONAL CONTINGENCIES

Common thought holds that the early career of all stand-up comics is affected by two contingencies: a tension-filled childhood and an adolescence during which they were either the class clown or the life of the party or both, both being manifestations of psychological problems. Our sample does not always conform to this image. Let us examine some of the interview data.

Of the fifty-seven interviewees, nineteen (33 percent) can be

said to have experienced, in some way, a tension-filled childhood or adolescence. That is, they grew up in a tough neighbourhood, suffered from bad health or learning problems, or were raised by parents who separated or divorced during this period of their lives. Twelve of the nineteen, or 21 percent of the overall sample, came from broken homes. In 1981, of the more than 5 million Canadians living in cities of 500,000 people or more 9.8 percent had parents who were divorced or separated (Statistics Canada 1982, 7–1).[3] Thus comics, as a group, have a somewhat more turbulent family background than the general population. These indicators of a tension-filled upbringing, though admittedly crude, suggest nonetheless that it is an early contingency for a third of all comics.

The class clown and life of the party contingencies are more accurate. Fifty-nine percent of the professionals and 81 percent of the amateurs reported being identified in these terms, or at least as witty, by their high school and post–high school friends. The present data offer no explanation for the difference between the professionals and the amateurs. But one thing is clear – it cannot be explained by an age difference among the respondents, for their average ages at the time of interviews were nearly identical, 27.2 years for the amateurs and 27.8 years for professionals.

In passing it should be noted that wittiness, or a talent for spontaneous humour was seen by many comics as unrelated to their drive for success as entertainers. The prepared humour that was said in chapter 3 to be part of the foundation of a comic's act is not spontaneous. The successful humourist does not have to be witty. He or she need only have a sense of humour sufficient to create and present effective jokes, monologues, and one-liners.

Although no systematic attempt was made to analyze the psychological adjustment of respondents, their brief histories did not in general suggest that this was a problem. If the 33 percent who experienced an exceptional level of tension during childhood and adolescence can be said to have had adjustment problems, this is but a minority. Fisher and Fisher (1981) claim that almost all the comics they examined overcame major traumas prior to becoming stage performers. But Wilson's review (1985, 132–2) of their study and other similar ones indicates that such investigations are of limited value, based on vague impressionistic research methods. The issue concerns the validity of findings. The Fishers' results conform closely to public stereo-

types and use nonobjective measures. Moreover, there is no theoretical reason to believe that humour is more likely to come from, or that its quality is likely to be better because of, a difficult background as opposed an easier one.[4]

Apart from occasional psychological problems, a number of contingencies were discovered in the early years of these comics that fostered a predisposition to try their hand at stand-up. For example, a large proportion of the respondents said they were fascinated as children and adolescents with either recorded comedy or televised comedy or both. In the interviews, they often traced their taste for humour to favourite programs or recordings.

Another important predisposing contingency was extensive involvement in public performances. Specifically, a large majority of both amateur and professional respondents engaged in one or more of the following as teenagers or young adults and prior to their first appearance onstage as comics: drama, emceeing, public speaking, writing humour, radio announcing, and popular entertainment (music, magic, sketches, impressions). Here they learned what it is like to be in the limelight. Here, too, they received some on-the-job training, learning, for instance, how to use a microphone, project the voice, establish eye contact, and enunciate words.

Seven (of thirty-one) professionals and one amateur (of twenty-six) got into stand-up from an improvisational background. All but one had participated in Theatresports, the internationally acclaimed invention of University of Calgary drama professor Keith Johnstone (Shewchuck 1987). It consists of a series of improvisational games wherein the audience makes suggestions and a small number of players on a stage spontaneously act them out in short sketches. The sketches are meant to be funny. Participation provides future comics with, among other things, stage experience, ideas for humourous monologues, and experience thinking on their feet so that they can handle emergencies like heckling and forgotten lines. A related approach to improvisation is found in French Canada's *ligues d'improvisation* (see chapter 2). One professional respondent performed in a *ligue* before entering comedy.

Several other factors that might be considered contingencies at the beginning of a comedy career turned out to be of little significance. For instance, very few respondents had parents who were in entertainment or the performing wing of the fine arts. Although 14 percent of the overall sample (six professionals and two amateurs) identified themselves as "loners" in school, this

may not be significantly different from the proportion of such people in the school population as a whole. Independence can be an advantage, inasmuch as comics must develop a capacity to operate as entertainment entrepreneurs, developing and selling their services on their own (see chapter 7). And, unlike budding entertainment magicians (Stebbins 1984, 68), the future comic does not become enamoured of his or her art through contact with live performances. The fact that nearly all comedy is presented in places that sell liquor prevents most youngsters from hearing it live until age eighteen or nineteen, depending on the province of residence.

SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND

The amateurs and professionals of this study were much alike in socioeconomic background. For example, they had the same educational profiles. All but five of the fifty-seven respondents graduated from high school. Thirty-four, or 60 percent of the overall sample, either completed an average of two years of university or worked toward or completed a trade or technical school program. Fourteen percent (8 respondents) held a bachelor's degree.

This profile is consistent with the class roots of the respondents. Of the thirty-five for whom I have data twenty-nine, or 83 percent, come from the lower middle class. One or both parents were employed in trades, in lesser white-collar positions, or in their own small businesses. Of the remaining six respondents, one parent, usually the father, was a professional or an upper-level manager.

A substantial majority of the sample, then, faced in their early post–high school years the hurdle that most Canadians of the same age and socioeconomic background face at this point in their lives, for to move up from the lower middle class usually requires at least a four-year university degree (McRoberts 1982, 391). To graduate, a person must have personal drive, parental encouragement, diligence, financial backing, and a capacity to defer economic gratification until after university. These criteria, research demonstrates (McRoberts 1982), are much easier for middle- and upper-class youth to meet than for youth born into the lower part of the class structure.

Parental encouragement and personal drive pushed thirty of the respondents into university and technical programs. But they lost interest in these and dropped out to search for other work.

Being uncommonly intelligent they did not take to the mundane jobs at their disposal – in sales, as waiters, driving taxis, or in a trade or technical occupation where the work is repetitive and mechanical. Another twelve interviewees had yet to work, having just left school or having failed to find a job after leaving. They too were seeking careers in comedy, but not because of disenchantment with work for which they were formally qualified. Finally, fifteen comics were employed in reasonably appealing work before getting into comedy.

In short, close to three-quarters of the overall sample (forty-two respondents) were searching for an interesting career when the idea of stand-up first occurred to them. The following case is typical, although Tom (a pseudonym) drifted until age twenty-nine, longer than most interviewees in this category.

I graduated from high school in Truro, Nova Scotia. After that, I went to university for two years ... Then I left for the West to make some money and took a year off. That was about nine years ago. I went first to Toronto, however, to visit some old friends ... They weren't around, so I decided to go to Vancouver. On my way to Vancouver – I was hitchhiking – I got a ride to Calgary. I stopped there and hung around for a few days and ran into some people that I knew. Then I got a job there and stayed for about five years.

In Calgary I was working as a waiter and then in sales. Then I got a job working up north in an oilfield. So when I came out of there I had lots of money, so I went home to Nova Scotia to visit. After that I was going to come back out to Alberta and head back up north to Fort Nelson, B.C. On the way I stopped in Edmonton to see a couple of people I knew, and I have been there ever since. There I worked in the pipeline industry for awhile.

I always had an interest in photography, so I started buying camera gear and became a photographer. I was a professional photographer for three years. I ended up buying a studio. I was also free-lancing. I was getting lots of work and making lots of money. But I was young and the studio had many headaches which I was not really ready for. I fell out with my partner, and so I kind of drifted off. I loved photography, but I knew that wasn't my end goal, that wasn't what I wanted to do. That wasn't what I wanted to sweat on twenty-four hours a day. It was a lot of fun and I really enjoyed it, but you have to put up with a lot of hassles with customers and clients, you know – "This is not a good picture but it's you" – you know, what can you do?

Then I took an interesting twist from there, I continued to free-lance

after I got rid of the studio. I got a contract with the Edmonton Association for the Mentally Handicapped. They were looking for a photographer to do a slide presentation. So I started working with the mentally handicapped, and after the project was over they wanted to keep me on. I was enjoying this; it was basically fun. I was, by then, working with the mentally handicapped, teaching them living skills. I made a lot of close personal friendships with many of the people there. I worked there for about a year.

This brings us to October of last year. The idea of entering stand-up comedy hit me like a sledgehammer. I was watching television, but nothing interesting was on. And I began to ask myself, "What do I want to do? Like I'm twenty-nine years old now, what do I want to do?" I brought it up with a couple of my friends who said go for it. I also know the brother-in-law of [a professional comic], and he said go for it. So I thought right there that I'm going through with this.

So obviously the first thing you have to do is you have to study it. You have to find out what you're up against so that you can start preparing yourself for it. So the closest place for that was Yuk Yuk's in Edmonton. So I'll go there and apply for a job as a waiter. And that's exactly what I did.

So I went and applied for the job and got it. At that time I didn't know that they had an open mike, an amateur night where they develop people. All I wanted to do was go and study it and find out what I'd have to do to become a comedian. The open-mike night helped me a lot.

The remaining fifteen respondents were pursuing more or less acceptable careers when they discovered their bent for comedy. They faced the difficult decision of whether to renounce their work for careers in show business. Three amateurs are going to try to keep both jobs; three professionals have succeeded at doing this. People employed in the fine and popular arts, who work as substitute teachers, or who free-lance can manage both lines of work, even though to establish oneself in stand-up requires considerable time on the road.

In this tangle of employment interests and occupational histories one thing is clear: comedy has enormous appeal to the respondents of this study. Only one of the twenty-six amateurs said he intended to pursue it part time. The rest were intending, whatever their background, to take up comedy fulltime. To the individual, professionals said they had no regrets about choosing comedy as their life's work, even though it has, as we shall see, its disagreeable moments.

DISCOVERING THE COMEDY CLUB

Other than stimulating would-be comics to look for better work, occupational and socioeconomic background were, in most instances, unrelated to the respondents' discovery of the comedy club. Only a few, such as Tom, worked in the industry or near it, in film, radio, television, acting, or entertainment. Rather, most, especially amateurs, heard about comedy clubs and comics from friends and acquaintances.

Seventy-five percent of the amateurs (twenty of twenty-six) made their first significant contact with stand-up by going to a live performance in a comedy club. A young man or woman might say to a friend, "Let's go to the Comedy Nest tomorrow night. Howard Nemetz is going to be there, My cousin saw him in Ottawa last month, says he's really funny." The friend and future comic accepts the suggestion: "Sounds good. I used to listen to George Carlin records all the time, but I have never seen any live comedy." Five other amateurs met stand-up comics through their participation in drama, radio, Theatresports, and the like. As we have seen, Tom worked in a comedy club.

Among professional respondents, discovery of the comedy club came about in a more varied way. Data for this contingency are available for twenty-one of them. Only a third of this group made their first significant adult contact with stand-up by going to a nightclub. This is to be expected, for a number of the professionals have had long careers that began at or close to the opening of the first Canadian comedy clubs. Many of these respondents learned about the clubs through inside channels. Eight heard about local stand-up through colleagues in drama or Theatresports programs. Two were entertainers in a related variety art. The remaining four happened to know a comic or saw an advertisement for a comedy show.

However, while the future performer's trip to a comedy club may seem to be a matter of chance, the friend or friends who suggest the idea may do so with an ulterior motive. Thirteen of the professionals and fourteen of the amateurs indicated that it was a friend or group of friends who encouraged them to try their hand as comics. The friends had identified the future comic as a witty person (not a true career asset, as noted earlier) who could succeed onstage. It seems reasonable to conclude that those friends would be inclined to suggest an evening at a comedy club to someone so obviously talented. "She's so

funny," a workmate might say, "she's bound to get a kick out of Lisa-Gay Tremblay's act at Yuk Yuk's Saturday night."

Nonetheless, many of today's stand-up comics discover their occupation by chance. For the vast majority there were no childhood fantasies, no brushes with the occupation in university, no routine contact with its practitioners (unlike aspiring dentists and school teachers) and no parental guidance or persuasion in this direction. Indeed, in the case of the professionals, parents were especially unreceptive to the idea of their son or daughter seeking a career in comedy. With but a few exceptions, they were opposed to or reacted neutrally to the announcement of such plans.[5] The amateurs, having entered comedy at a later date when the art was better established, met as a group with less parental opposition or neutrality. Nearly half the male amateurs reported that at least one parent (more often the mother then the father) supported their show business plans. The parents of female comics were uniformly opposed, chiefly on the grounds that the comedy room stage is no place "for a nice girl." This sentiment was reported by both amateur and professional women.

Parents, not to mention the future comics themselves, were frequently surprised by this turn of events. Opposition might have been greater, had more parents realized the seriousness with which their son or daughter was pursuing comedy as a career. One common reaction was that this was a fleeting interest, a "bizarre" pastime. Neutrality and moderate encouragement frequently changed to opposition when the comic announced his or her intention to quit work and pursue the life of an entertainer, especially when that work was secure and well paid. Later, as successful artists, many professionals reported a change to an attitude of acceptance. Now the parents, who initially knew next to nothing about the life of a comic but suspected the worst, could see that an honourable, modestly remunerated career was possible. In the words of one young female professional:

My parents wouldn't even tell my family in Europe what I was doing, because it [comedy] would be too off the wall. "Oh she's still going to school." They were really ashamed of it. There wasn't any pressure to drop out of it really, but I knew that they weren't happy with it. They never really said anything. What they thought was that I was going to outgrow it, it was just another fad. Then, I guess they got a bit worried when all of a sudden it was becoming serious. By that

time it was too late, I had gone down to Toronto and had some success there. "Well, at least she's not a total failure." Some of the family in Toronto had come to see me, so they had that reinforcement. At least some of the family is accepting it.

The encouragement of friends, by contrast could be powerful. For young adults friends are often more influential than parents, as this senior male amateur attests: "The main reason why I have pursued stand-up comedy is that my friends have all really encouraged me. I've tried various things in life and probably failed at most of them, whereas this thing, comedy, is a gift for me. And most of the people in comedy are really great. The majority will encourage you and give you little tips."

TAKING THE PLUNGE

For many comics in this study, their first live comedy show was a true turning point. By this time everything was in place. Their lives had been affected by the personal, educational, and socio-economic contingencies mentioned earlier. They were searching for an interesting career to replace an uninteresting one. They had a penchant for humour. And now they had friends who were saying that they, too, could be comics. Not every member of the overall sample fits this pattern, to be sure, but the majority do.

Moreover, a number of the respondents indicated that the first time they saw live comedy it looked easy. It occurred to them that they could be even funnier than many of the people onstage, and in their naïveté they were inspired to try their hand at it. "It looked like telling jokes with the guys," reflected one professional. Easy and fun like any conversation.

By no means did every member of the sample enter comedy the day after the show. More commonly, that decision was delayed for the next few months and made often after another visit or two to the local comedy club, perhaps reinforced by televised or recorded comedy. But before long the budding comic was writing lines or assembling lines and jokes heard earlier, with the thought, clear or vague, that it was time to go onstage to see "what it was like." The majority prepared or assembled lines for their maiden voyages. Only two of the overall sample said they simply went to the club and told street jokes as these came to mind. (Sometimes, as I observed in one comedy club, a person walks in off the street during an open-mike night,

mounts the stage, and talks extemporaneously to the audience about everyday life in a way that may be interesting, but is not especially humourous.)

Forty of the fifty-four anglophone comics made their debut during an amateur night of some sort, mostly in comedy clubs but also sometimes in nightclubs featuring a range of entertainment on amateur nights. A number of the sample had never been to an amateur night and so had little or no idea of what to expect. Up to that point the only live comedy they knew was what they had seen in weekend shows. The remaining fourteen respondents performed initially as emcees or, in two cases, as opening acts.

Many appear to have anticipated the worst, for despite widespread encouragement from friends, only eight of the fifty-four said they invited either friends or relatives to their first performance. In fact, many respondents kept the venture secret, going alone to the room, sometimes for several performances, before letting others know. "This could be bad," many of them feared, "better that no one I know sees what happens."

Two-thirds of the overall sample said their initial presentation was a success. People laughed, perhaps not as much as the performer would have liked, but they laughed. What the comics had expected, that some wag would sarcastically observe that the five-minute performing period had elapsed, did not happen. They remembered their lines and completed their act without bolting prematurely from the stage in acute embarrassment. The ratio of successes to failures for first acts was more or less the same for amateur and professional respondents.

The other third defined their first night onstage as a failure or (two respondents) as uncertain, neither a success nor a failure. Failing meant forgetting lines, leaving the stage because of lack of material, and especially, telling jokes, anecdotes, and monologues that drew little or no laughter. Some were heckled, some booed, some had objects (even bottles) thrown at them. And, although none of the respondents admitted this, they may have been victims of certain well-known resorts of emcees. One is to turn off the microphone when a neophyte overstays his or her welcome. Another is to usher the neophyte offstage with a curt thank you dropped in the middle of another uninspiring line.

The experience of bombing is unforgettable and excruciating, especially when it first happens. An amateur, now close to professional, reminisces about his first performance:

The first night was an abject failure. You're supposed to do about five to seven minutes of material. I did maybe two and a half and ran off stage. I was terrified. And I failed about three or four nights, and they were all terrible, I lost faith in myself at this point and quit. In the intervening time I had what some might call a nervous breakdown – I was hospitalized for about three weeks. This was not entirely due to comedy, but that was a factor. I stayed away from comedy rooms for about six months. Then I came back with one minute of material, which went very well. I know I didn't do great now, looking back in retrospect, but, compared with my first times, I felt a lot more comfortable with it. Since then I have been to nearly every amateur night in town [for two years].

Age of Entry

Unlike many other entertainment fields, stand-up comedy draws performers comparatively late in their lives. The average age of professional respondents at the time of their first amateur act was slightly over twenty-two and a half. The average for amateurs was almost exactly twenty-five. Teenagers are rare in this art, although people as young as fourteen or fifteen have been seen in clubs. The present sample includes an amateur who started at seventeen and three professionals who started between seventeen and nineteen.

An important precondition here is knowing the adult world well enough to interpret it in a manner humourous to adults. Ordinarily it takes time to gain such knowledge. Another precondition is an adequate development of verbal skills; the ability to use language improves with experience, with age. Finally, other things being equal, a young performer is more likely to succeed if he or she looks like an adult, not an adolescent. Children and adolescents do and say funny things, but comedy clubs are defined as places for adults. Here we have another example of the importance of context in understanding humour (see chapter 3).

Why did professional respondents enter comedy at an average age of two and a half years younger than amateurs? The answer is not that the professionals were younger, for as mentioned earlier they were six months older. Unfortunately, the interviews and observations offer no explanation for this curious discrepancy. None of the contingencies, turning points, and preconditions discussed in this chapter correlates with it. We must await

further research to determine whether the discrepancy is the result of a sampling peculiarity or something else.

GETTING STARTED IN QUEBEC

For reasons considered in chapter 2, stand-up comedy as an identifiable art arrived late in Quebec. At present, most of those who identify themselves as professional *stand-up comiques* entered their careers from quasi- or mixed stand-up or some other variety art. Performers such as Yvons Deschamps, Marc Favreau (Sol), and Jean Lapointe are seasoned variety entertainers with long histories as mimes, *monologuistes,* and sketch players, among other talents. In recent years they have added stand-up routines to their repertoire. A number of popular Québécois singers have discovered, as they talk to their audiences between songs, that comedy has an appeal at least as great as their music. They, too, have begun to drift toward the stand-up comedy stage. Guy Crépeau and Serge Turbide exemplify this trend.

To move into stand-up required for this group a comprehension of English sufficient to understand the televised (and later live) humour of anglophone comics. It was this group that helped bring American stand-up across the language barrier to Quebec. A bilingual facility may be less important for those Québécois starting out today. They can pattern themselves after francophone performers who now routinely appear throughout Quebec on tour and on French television.

Nonetheless, if they are not entering stand-up from a related variety art but are coming directly to it, like nearly all their anglophone counterparts, young *comiques* must somehow find a way to develop their material and their ability to present it. Here I lack systematically collected data. Since there are no amateur nights in the French Canadian entertainment world, early stage experience appears to accumulate on a hit-or-miss basis. It seems that the first stand-up performances of young Québécois *comiques* occur in high school, CEGEP, or university. Or they are given before groups of friends and perhaps at general amateur talent nights in a neighbourhood bar or cabaret. Historically, the main route to fame in francophone Quebec has been through the festival Juste pour rire and its regional competitions where new talent is identified and nurtured. With the possibility of Le Fou rire being revived, there may eventually be a second route.

CHAPTER FIVE

Becoming a Comic

Unlike many fields, stand-up comedy and sports make a clear-cut distinction between amateur and professional. Regular participants in leisure sport and comedy are serious amateurs, or people following a complex and deeply engaging line of activity to which they are committed (Stebbins 1982). Some are eventually promoted to professional status by a "gatekeeper" who judges the person in question as good enough for full-time work. In team sport the amateur is promoted – that is, hired – by one or two gatekeepers, a coach or a personnel manager. Similarly, in club comedy a booking agent or room manager makes professionals of former amateurs by hiring them to present opening acts at regular shows (Thursdays and weekends).

The period of time between the first amateur performance and promotion is referred to here as the development stage of a comic's career. In discussing it, we examine the bitter and the sweet of life as an amateur stand-up. We start, however, with more theoretical concerns: What is the nature of amateurism?

AMATEURS

The public image of the amateur is both unkind and simplistic. Amateurs, it is thought, engage part-time and for no remuneration in a demanding activity also pursued by professionals. More accurately, amateurs normally spend less time at this serious leisure than they spend at their regular jobs, even though there is more time in a week for leisure (after eating and sleeping) than, typically, for work (approximately thirty-eight hours). Moreover, amateurs, wherever they are found – the arts, science, sport, or entertainment – do sometimes receive pay, though not

enough to support themselves. Some amateur comics receive ten or fifteen dollars or a small percentage of the gate for a five- to ten-minute opening act. This is usually a special situation, the beginning of a regular weekday show (usually Wednesday or Thursday) or a one-night stand at which advanced amateur talent is acceptable.

It is also commonly held that amateurs are technically inferior to professionals. There is some truth to this; many professionals, because of more extensive training and experience, are better at what they do than all or most of their amateur counterparts. But as Jacques Barzun (1954, 21) so eloquently explains, some amateurs are actually better than some professionals: "You have for every profession no company of mutually respectful equals but a regular gradation of imperfect aspirants to the good. A parallel gradation necessarily obtains among amateurs, and it follows that by applying rigorously any test of pure talent one would find many an amateur high up among the professionals any many a professional down among the duffers."

Moving now from the public to the sociological image of amateurs, we may note that in every field amateurs choose their activity because of its strong appeal (amateur as *amator,* or lover). The activity is a genuine pursuit; the participant is serious and committed, willing to submit to regimentation (rehearsals, practice) and systematization (schedules, organization). This orientation toward leisure clearly distinguishes amateurs from players, dabblers and novices.

The most dedicated amateurs, the ones most likely to achieve the competence of some professionals, have been referred to as *devotees* (Stebbins 1977, 35). Those who are only mildly interested, but significantly more so than dabblers, are known as *participants.* So far in my studies of amateurs in fields outside comedy, the participants have always substantially outnumbered the devotees. Not so with amateur comics.

To measure commitment to stand-up comedy, each amateur respondent in this study was asked to indicate the average number of hours he or she spent each week at it. The tally includes performing, writing, observing live shows, rehearsing, and "hanging out" after an evening show. Through discussion with them about the difficulty of pursuing comedy and holding down a job, it became clear that ten hours per week was a reasonable estimation of commitment at the participant level. A participant devoting ten hours to comedy might write an hour or so each day and spend approximately three hours a week

Table 1
Distribution of Types of Amateurs in Stand-up Comedy

	Career Phase			
Commitment	*Preprofessional*	*Pure*	*Postprofessional*	*Total*
Devotee	15	0	0	15
Participant	10	1	0	11
Total	25	1	0	26

performing, hanging out, and watching other comics. Eleven of the twenty-six amateurs (42 percent) could be categorized as participants by this criterion. The 58 percent categorized as devotees spent between fifteen and thirty hours on their art. They averaged just under twenty-one hours weekly, whereas the participants averaged just over six. Most devotees spent their free time performing, hanging out, and observing other comics.

With one exception, the amateurs were hoping to make comedy into a full-time career. Therefore twenty-five of the twenty-six respondents could be considered preprofessional amateurs, whereas the remaining person could be classified as a pure amateur. The distribution of the amateur respondents by level of commitment and career phase is summarized in table 1. The postprofessional amateur is a former professional who has returned, however briefly, to amateur status.

There would be more pure amateurs if there were more slots for them to perform. Agents and managers give preference to those who show a commitment to comedy through steady improvement and clear intention to enter it full time. On the subject of postprofessional amateurs, it should be noted that, although I never encountered any, there was talk among the comics about them. A small number of Canadian comics have gone on from comedy to full-time work in film, radio, television, and advertising as writers, performers, directors, and producers. They have been known to drop into local comedy rooms from time to time on weeknights to do a guest set at a modest fee (or possibly no fee at all) for the pure joy of performing.

Further discussion of the concepts of amateur and professional is available elsewhere (Stebbins 1977, 1982). Suffice it to say here that amateur and professional comics and their audiences can be defined by (1) the three-way system of relationships that holds them together, and (2) by certain differences in attitude on the part of comics and their public. Since a major portion of this book is about these two factors, little more need be said here about sociological definitions. However, since the question

sometimes arises in lay circles as well as in the sociological world as to whether comics and other full-time entertainers are truly professional, I shall devote the beginning of the next chapter to a discussion of this issue.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

It is clear from interviews for this study that the development stage of careers in comedy is becoming longer. The professionals, who on average entered comedy two and a half years earlier then the amateurs but at more or less the same age, spent an average of slightly less than six months as amateurs before landing their first paid opening or other regular spot in a weekend or Thursday night show. For the amateurs, this period lasted on average a year and three-quarters.

The development stage ends and the establishment stage begins when the comic starts getting booked for opening spots, perhaps along with local emcee gigs, often enough to make a living that justifies quitting his or her day job. Some amateurs in the sample had already performed several openers and were on the verge of turning professional. Others were, by their own evaluation, six months to a year from this turning point. No one in the amateur sample had passed entirely into the next career stage.

There are two explanations for this discrepancy in the length of career development. One is that the professionals having started two and a half years earlier, entered comedy when the Canadian club circuit was enjoying unprecedented growth. The typical professional in our sample would have given his or her first amateur performance in the latter half of 1984. Between June 1984 and December 1986, Yuk Yuk's opened eleven of its nineteen rooms, while Punchlines expanded to a six-night week with multiple shows on several of those nights.

By contrast, the typical amateur in our sample was performing for the first time at the beginning of 1986. By the time he or she reaches the level of development verging on the professional, there will be fewer spots open and therefore greater competition.

The other explanation is that the professionals as a group may be harder working and more talented and experienced than the amateurs as a group. The former have lost the less talented and committed among them through competition, whereas the latter have yet to pass through this process or are now only entering it. Were we to hold ability, commitment, and experience constant, the discrepancy between the two samples with respect

to the length of career development might shrink significantly. The remaining discrepancy could then perhaps be traced to the changing demand for comics at different points in the history of stand-up comedy in Canada.

The possibility that the amateurs took a different approach to their development than the professionals cannot account for the discrepancy. There were five patterns of development that were found in both samples. Any one pattern can lead to regular performances at amateur nights and in occasional brief opening spots in regular shows. The decision to participate on a regular basis depends on the amateur's career goals as well as his or her talent.

Let us consider first the *sporadic* pattern. Six of the forty-nine respondents for which I have data attended amateur nights off and on after their first performances and until their commitment finally led to steady performances. Some of the amateurs in the sample were still in the sporadic pattern and might never perform steadily. In the *gradual* pattern, involvement in amateur nights becomes more and more frequent after the first performance. Only one respondent followed this pattern. The *steady* pattern was the most prevalent. Twenty-six respondents had performed first on amateur nights and later in regular opening spots at least once a week from their initial time onstage to the time of the interview. An additional eight followed a *broken-steady* pattern. The desire or the need to take off four or six months or more to work or go to school interrupted an otherwise steady participation in comedy. Finally, another eight respondents followed the *delayed-steady* pattern. After one or two performances during open-mike nights, they left comedy for several months and returned later to pursue it steadily.

Developing an Act

Developing an act requires two major components. One is instruction, the other experience. The first is a social process, the second is a personal one. Instruction refers to the three major ways the comics of this study learned from other people how to perform: group lessons, systematic tutelage, and personal advice.

Programs of instruction in comedy are given to small groups of amateurs by, among others, Ernie Butler (Comedy Nest, Montreal), Larry Horowitz (Yuk Yuk's, Toronto), Mark and Rich Elwood (Punchlines, Vancouver), and the staff at Lundi Juste pour rire (Montreal). Butler has a well-developed program. His Comedy

Workshop consists of instruction and observation of live comedy and is given in two-hour segments every Thursday night for six weeks. The workshops have been offered four times annually since 1984, when the first Comedy Nest opened. Students who make good progress in the course are given an opportunity to present five minutes of their own material at one of Butler's clubs. Butler prefers that amateurs enter comedy by this route rather than by the open-mike night. There are no amateur nights at the two Montreal Comedy Nests.

Tutelage is, by comparison, informal. Here, an experienced comic or manager guides the development of an amateur. There is no set curriculum as in group lessons, nor is there any fixed period of time over which instruction is completed. Rather, the tutor periodically monitors the amateur's performances and offers advice. This arrangement lasts until both agree that little else can be accomplished. The prominent tutors in Canada are Larry Horowitz at Yuk Yuk's, the Elwoods at Punchlines, and for francophones, the staff of Lundi Juste pour rire.

Many amateur comics receive personal advice from other comics about such concerns as timing, use of props, and sequencing monologues. Questions are asked and answers are given on the spot, although comics select their advisors carefully. Only respected amateurs and professionals (including possibly the emcee for the evening) are approached, usually in the green room, at the bar after the show, or over lunch the next day. If he or she is not already tutoring, a club manger may occasionally fill this role.[1]

And then there is experience. It is through trying out jokes, monologues, anecdotes, and one-liners that comics learn what draws laughs from an audience and what does not. By analyzing audio and video recordings of their performances, reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of those performances, and experimenting in the ways described in chapter 3, they gradually shape and expand a repertoire that can be sorted into shorter and longer acts appropriate to the audience at hand. For most amateurs and professionals, experience is one of the best teachers, but not the best teacher. That is, they normally profit from instruction as well.

LEARNING THE ROPES

Besides learning how to work up material and organize it into an act, the amateur comic in the development stage is also exposed to the daily world of comedy. Through experience and

observation, amateurs and junior professionals gradually learn how to behave in that world, what to expect of it, how to define routine situations, and the like. This eventually results in a rich stock of knowledge about how to practice their art and pursue their career. Learning the ropes in stand-up means, in general, picking up two things: conventions and tricks of the trade.

Conventions

The conventions are many. For example, comics seem never to simulate a telephone call by holding an imaginary handset to their ear and making a fist around an imaginary handle. Rather, they hold their hand with index and little fingers spread apart to simulate receiver and transmitter. Or consider the vocal convention of the low moan emitted after the punchline in a apparent attempt to emphasize the humour – a sort of tag. And amateurs soon learn through talk with other comics that stealing lines is nothing short of a crime. In this connection they observe however that certain lines are stock and that in the face of hecklers any line, stolen or stock, may be ethically used for extrication.[2]

We noted earlier that there are numerous conventional subjects about which comics talk. One broad principle is that anything, no matter how sacred, can become a subject so long as it produces the desired result – laughter. One belief widely held by comics is that comedy rooms are special places where people must learn to accept humour no matter how iconoclastic.[3] Comic iconoclasm, as mentioned in chapter 1, dates to the Middle Ages when monologuists satirized and lampooned important people and cherished beliefs. Comics are aware that many people have yet to learn about this tradition because stand-up comedy has only recently become a mass art.

Another convention is adherence to the time allotted by management for an act. The length of an act varies with the status of the performer: opener, middle, emcee, or headliner. Only the latter has the privilege of ignoring this convention and then, realistically, only if he or she and the audience are clearly enjoying the show at the point where it is supposed to end. We noted in chapter 4 that amateurs who overstay their time onstage may be bruskly ushered off by the emcee.[4] More commonly they respond to a nearby red light or sign held by the emcee. By the time comics reach professional status, they know how long it takes to do a set. When there is rapport with the audience, they are inclined to stay onstage and bask in it. This,

of course, shortens the stage time of those who follow, and they are likely to charge their overenthusiastic colleague with selfishness.

One further convention is the disdain of "cheat sheets." Young amateurs sometimes rely on a brief outline of their act to aid their memory. Even a furtive glance at a cheat sheet is considered unprofessional. Certainly cheat sheets alter the impression that a comic's presentation is spontaneous.

Tricks of the Trade

The tricks of the trade are even more numerous than its conventions. Some have already been discussed: knowing stock heckler lines, employing set-ups, using good timing and rhythm, entering and exiting on a high note, and so on. In addition, a comic must know how to handle a punchline that falls flat. Some comics say, "Trust me, folks, that was funny," during the awkward silence, which itself requires considerable timing ability.

One enjoyable trick is developing new material in the company of other comics after the show. One professional likened the process to a jam session. No fetters are imposed on creativity by management or the audience. It is a sort of brain-storming session in which participants feed off each other to produce new ideas, which are then distributed among them for possible incorporation in acts.

Many amateurs are surprised to learn that it is unnecessary, indeed unwise, to deliver a new act each time they go onstage. A number of those who succeed at their first amateur performance bomb at the second with new material. The care that goes into preparing the first night's set is missing in the hastily developed set delivered a week later. It is better, they eventually learn, to polish what one has and then add to it little by little.

Most amateurs quickly learn the importance of being original but find it hard to develop unique material and a distinct way of presenting it. Comic Chris Finn used the term derivative amateur to describe the tendency among many young amateurs to copy not only the lines and jokes of established performers but also their concepts, posture, gestures, and voice inflections. The process of becoming original is not, however, restricted to the development stage of a career. To establish him- or herself a professional must be creative in a way that attracts sizeable audiences.

Comics soon learn, too, that they should not bring their

Figure 3
Yuk Yuk's Talent-Rating Scale

Please rate each category from 1 to 5 (1 = poor, 5 = excellent)

Energy	*Stage Presence*	*Skills*	*Content*	*Originality*	*Classification*

Energy – Whether high or low depending on the character. Is there a special spark? Do they hold focus? Do you feel them feeding the audience?

Stage Presence – Are they watchable? Do they occupy their space well? How do they look? Do you want them representing us?

Skills – Do they scan the crowd? Do they use the mike well? Are they squinting or talking too fast? Do they have timing? Rate them on an overall impression of these factors.

Content – Is the material funny and well organized? Is it the kind of material that has a future somewhere other than stag parties? Was there enough variety for you?

Originality – Have you heard it, or something like it before? Does he/she seem to be greatly influenced by any other comic, especially a Yuk Yuk's comic? If so, rate them poorly.

Classification – Give them an "A" if you want them to be a club regular and be considered for outside work. Give them a "B" if you think they should get one out of every 8 to 10 weeknights but should still do amateur nights. Give a "C" if they should do amateur nights only. Please feel free to add pluses or minuses to your classification.

personal problems to the stage. A fight with the manager, an imminent divorce, or an affront from a colleague may be tempting subjects for three or four minutes of improvised talk. Such presentations are likely to flop. Anger shows through scenarios that are often too detailed and private for the audience to understand. The result is an overdoes of bitterness and an underdose of humour.

Figure 3, which summarizes tricks used by the most polished comics, is a reproduction of the rating sheet developed by Larry Horowitz and used since the latter half of 1986 to evaluate amateur acts at Yuk Yuk's in Toronto. The sheet is part of his instruction program referred to earlier in this chapter.

KILLING AND BOMBING

Although killing and bombing are by no means associated exclusively with the development stage of a career, they have particular importance here. Both, when they occur for the first time, are turning points that propel the amateur in certain directions.

Although amateurs vary widely in the number of acts that kill and bomb, none of the interviewees in this study reported an absence of either. In fact, for both amateurs and professionals, killing was the most frequently cited thrill in comedy and bombing the most frequently cited disappointment. The thrill that ranked second was career advancement – a dim second, as table 2 makes clear. Only the killing and bombing cells of table 2 are considered in this section. The other cells are taken up elsewhere in this chapter and the next.

As mentioned, two-thirds of the amateurs started their careers as comics with, if not a kill, then a self-defined success. They had to wait for one or more performances before the equally significant experience of bombing was theirs as well:

> The one night I bombed – that was disappointing and bad for me, but a lot of it was the crowd, too. Nothing went right, right from the emcee. I don't care what you would have done with that crowd, it was impossible to succeed. It was just the whole atmosphere. I'm not saying that I'm a professional at this, but I believe that your emcee is as important as your headliner. The emcee was local. This one emcee ... intimidates everyone [the comics] to the point where he wants to be funnier than the rest. It's almost like he wants them to

Table 2
Types of Thrills and Disappointments in Stand-up Comedy

Sentiment	*Number of Amateurs**	*Number of Professionals**
THRILLS		
Killing	21	17
Career advances	9	11
Special recognition	6	2
Meeting famous comics	2	0
None	0	4
No answer	1	4
DISAPPOINTMENTS		
Bombing	16	10
Career disappointments	12	0
Reviews	0	2
None	1	11
No answer	1	1

* Totals are greater than the size of each sample because respondents sometimes listed more than one type of thrill or disappointment.

fail. I asked him a couple of times to do a few things [e.g., adjust the mike, give a special introduction], but he did things more or less to throw my timing completely off. He did it successfully the first show. The next show I thought, "Piss on you, you bastard," and things went better. (Senior amateur)

Many respondents described this experience as one of acute embarrassment, like being stripped naked before a jeering crowd. The comic "dies" onstage, especially when the mood of the audience changes from indifference to hostility. Yet many a comic will tell you that you must bomb as a developing amateur to become an established professional. As in the preceding case, the performer learns how to handle the cause of his or her failure and thus how to avoid it in the future. In comedy, performers learn from their mistakes and, it should be added, from circumstances beyond their control.

Killing – a learning experience as well – is the ultimate reward in stand-up comedy, the goal amateurs strive for at every appearance, the goal they carry with them for the rest of their career. They learn, too, the valuable lesson that most of the time they will neither bomb nor kill but perform somewhere in between.

The qualitative distribution of the impact of humour is rather like a normal statistical curve, says comic Evan Carter, with the crashing successes and crushing failures occupying small areas at the extremes of the scale. Here is one senior amateur's euphoric description of a success:

> One thrill I had was just last week, a Monday night [amateur night]. It was near the end. I guess it was not because I was any great comic but, considering the calibre that had gone on before, they were anxious to see someone with talent. I went up there, and with what might have been two minutes of regular material on any other night lasted for about eight minutes. They were just laughing like crazy. Then I said, "Well it's time to go," and the emcee was tapping the mike, but they said, "No, no, stay, stay." That's the first time that happened, that was a great feeling. I learn a lot from the good nights, that's one of the things I like about them.

This brings us to a characteristic of stand-up comedy that is well known to its practitioners. A comic receives immediate feedback about the quality of his or her act as presented to the audience. No other art, performing or nonperforming, offers artists so quick and clear a measure of quality. Moreover, there is, under adequate performance conditions, no one to whom to pass the responsibility for killing and bombing. As playwright, producer, director, and actor, the comic gets all the credit and all the blame, like it or not. Indeed, it is exactly this degree of control over their efforts and their artistic rewards that many comics find appealing.

BEHIND THE SCENES

It is time to return to the comedy room. Here we examine the social and personal lives of comics – events and routines in the green room, in the wings, on the stage, and in the comedy room itself. Often such behing-the-scenes activity significantly affects the careers of amateurs and, invariably, gives them a profound sense of what it is like to perform stand-up.

The Green Room

A good deal of humour is heard in the green room. There are wisecracks, at which many comics are past masters. And here lines and concepts are discussed, new ones recently created by

the speaker or older ones heard elsewhere that bear repeating in this critical gathering. Comics laugh heartily at many of the wisecracks, but to proffered lines they often respond dryly with a smile and the laconic comment, "That's funny." Such a reaction, the developing amateur soon learns, is a compliment.

The green room is also a place for gossiping and backbiting. Here information is enthusiastically exchanged about events at other clubs across the country, about activities and antics of other comics, about strengths and weaknesses of room managers and booking agents, and about changes in the industry. When I was in the field, rumours were circulating about Punchlines opening a room in Toronto, Yuk Yuk's opening one in St John's, and the Yuk Yuk's chain being purchased by Catch a Rising Star of New York.

In the green room the wide-eyed, newly arrived amateur undergoes rapid socialization into the lore and life-style of the comedy career. Sometimes the exchanges there are chiefly informative. At other times they dwell on the underhandedness of a particular manager, the profligacy of a fellow comic, the unruliness of certain audiences, exploitation by an agent, and so on. There are also stories of fantastic achievements, wondrous performances with encores (encores are rare in stand-up comedy), great nights where the speaker killed (with or without encores), or stunning successes by colleagues in difficult performance conditions. As one longtime professional put it, "Comedy is very grapevinish." The green room is where the subculture of the stand-up comic is created and maintained.

One reason why the green room is so central is that it is nearly always an unavoidable crossroad for comics. When the house is full, the green room is the only place for the comic to sit when not onstage.[5] It is usually also the only place to talk, for silence is the rule in the comedy room itself. Furthermore, the four acts that comprise the typical show are commonly given by people from different cities in Canada and at times from the United States. The performers report about goings on in different parts of the grapevine.

Status Ranking. The green room is also one of the places where comics rank each other. They base their evaluations on a number of criteria: energy, appearance, originality, audience banter, audience control, audience response, stage presence, verbal skill, use of props, and possibly more. These criteria, discussed in countless conversations in the green rooms across Canada, have

given rise to four ranking systems created by comics. The two main ones have formed within the stables of Yuk Yuk's and Punchlines. Then there are two in Quebec, one a ranking of francophone *comiques,* the other of their anglophone counterparts in the Montreal area.

A few top performers transcend the ranking systems. That is, they have achieved reputations that extend beyond the locality or region where they started and where a particular system holds sway. Mike MacDonald of Yuk Yuk's and André-Phillipe Gagnon of French Quebec are two prominent examples. Some Canadian headliners, through independent entertainment agencies, such as Evan Carter and Mary Putz of the Zoé Stotland Agency (Toronto), established reputations independent of the four systems after coming up through one or more of them.

There is, to be sure, a correspondence between a comic's rank in one of these systems and his or her position as opener, middle act, emcee, or headliner. Still, there is disagreement about ranks, and that makes for lively talk in the green rooms. Comics were heard to remark that so-and-so was not good enough to perform as a headliner or middle act, an opinion often accompanied by charges of favouritism from agents or managers. Those who come up fast as openers and middle acts are possibly the object of more of this sort of analysis than those whose progress is average or below average. Sometimes the sex of the comic was used to explain the discrepancy between rank and quality: "She got that show because she's a woman." "A woman has to be twice as good as a man to get promoted in this business." In short, like informal ranking systems in many other walks of life, those in comedy are founded on a combination of objective evaluations, factual information, and bitter jealousy.

Status ranking is also prevalent among amateurs, and again the green room is the venue for much of it. What has been said about this process among professionals also applies to amateurs, except that those being ranked are always local. Managers promote performers by choosing them for showcase nights, opening spots in weekday shows, and substitute weekend openers when scheduled professionals are unable to meet their commitments.

And like their professional colleagues, amateurs might disagree with a manager's decision to promote certain people and not others. As table 3 demonstrates, politics is the third most prevalent dislike among amateurs – that is, the use of power to favour or discriminate against someone. I never heard comics

Table 3
Types of Dislikes in Stand-up Comedy

Major Dislikes Expressed by Amateurs	*Major Dislikes Expressed by Professionals*
Personality problems (10)*	Mediator problems (21)
Mediator problems (9)	Personality problems (14)
Politics (7)	The road (14)
Professionals' behaviour (6)	Performance problems (13)
Stealing (6)	Stealing (12)
Performance problems (5)	Public image (6)

* The number of times a problem was mentioned is given in parenthesis. Totals are greater than the size of each sample because respondents sometimes mentioned more than one dislike.

accuse anyone of being political other than agents, managers, and organizers of festivals and contests. The following remarks made by an amateur about politics are typical:

I'm going to perform on one of the weekday showcases, although they haven't told me which one yet. This is a very political thing. I didn't think it was going to be like this. Everything I have gone to is so political. You know, somebody is supposed to be in charge of you, but they never come up to see you. And yet decisions are made about you. A lot of toes get stepped on. People you think don't deserve the breaks are getting them and people that do deserve them are being overlooked. It's very political. You got to like everybody and kiss a lot of ass. You do a lot of smiling. Eventually, I guess you get more pull. There is no support, only peer support. They don't try to promote you. They could see that a guy is good and they could try to help him. And they could do this more quickly. But nobody bothers to watch anyone. You do it on your own and hope you'll get a lucky break. I've developed friends at [a comedy room] which, I think, is eventually going to help me. I know the manager there, so that if someone is away one night and I'm there, I'm sure that I can get on. You wouldn't think that you would have to curry favour this way. You'd think, if you're good, someone would say, "We'd like to help you. Why don't you try this? This is what you need to do. We'll put

you on here." A number of us are ready to do regular nights, but no one is willing to give us regular dates. This would improve us even more and give us more confidence. They tell us that we need you, but nobody is bothering to help us. You just got to stick with it.

Still, politics was listed as a dislike by only seven of the twenty-six amateur respondents. Some, of course, benefited from politics. Others seemed to accept it as part of the natural order, at least to the extent that in interviews they omitted it from their list of dislikes. But however they saw the politics of stand-up comedy, the amateurs seemed generally aware that they must, like the respondent above, be likeable and ingratiate themselves with others lest someone with power and influence take a disliking to them.

Career disappointments (see table 2) were not always traced to biased mediators. Disappointment was sometimes the result of the respondent's own slow progress as a developing comic. Or of such contingencies as too many amateurs and too few spots, and the exasperating experience of killing on a night when the manager or agent was not present to observe.

Relations with Professionals. With about equal intensity amateurs dislike the tendency for some professionals either to belittle or snub them. Sometimes amateur comics invite put-downs by forcing themselves on a professional, requesting that he or she listen to a joke or anecdote or evaluate their act as they present it onstage. The first request, the professional knows, is inappropriate, for humour is best judged as it is being delivered to a live audience. As noted earlier, words are but a small part of what makes a line funny. The second request, though more valid, is considered gauche by many professionals. It is awkward to be placed in a position of truth teller. If an act is poor or mediocre, the professional has one choice: to be honest and hurt the amateur's feelings, or to lie and say the act was funny and nicely presented.

Because of the possibility of a hostile reaction, the amateurs in this study tended toward caution. Sixteen of the twenty-six respondents (61.5 percent) said they approached only professionals they knew or suspected were receptive to inquiries from amateurs. One thing amateurs quickly pick up around the green room is who is approachable and who is not, although such information usually pertains only to local professionals whose attitudes amateurs know well. When it came to talking shop

with professionals, over 80 percent of the sample recognized approachability as a problem and a variable. As the amateur here suggests, to be put down by a professional is only slightly less unpleasant than bombing:

> One of my big disappointments was being talked down to by a couple of pros who, so far as I'm concerned, are not that far ahead of me. But I didn't go in there with that attitude. I'm a very respectful person. I never say a bad thing about anybody. I try to put my best foot forward when I meet somebody, but these guys just started interrupting me when I was talking to [the room manager]. One of them started calling me an asshole and everything else. "Oh," I thought, "some bigshot from Toronto. Well, someday I'm going to be up the ladder and I'll pass you." That's what I felt like saying, but I would never bring that up to him or anything. I know that someday I'm going to be up the ladder. I've got the motivation to do it and I'm willing to put in the time to do it.

Camaraderie. In the face of such problems as snubs, politics, and the general insecurity that comes of trying to master a difficult art, amateur comics develop a remarkably strong bond, given the forces that tend to drive them apart. One is the competitiveness fostered by the ranking process. Another is the personality problems of amateurs (see table 3), considered in the next chapter. Notwithstanding these forces, it is clear from my fieldnotes that amateur comics often find their greatest support in other amateurs, not the entire group in the green room but selected people within that group. Amateurs sought advice from other amateurs as often as from professionals. And other amateurs were much more likely than professionals to be asked to comment on a new line, joke, or concept. Those who said they seldom or never sought advice from their fellows were, by this point, senior amateurs close to promotion. Earlier they had drawn on them for support and guidance.

Technical Problems. One further aspect of life in the green room remains to be considered. The green room is where most unexpected technical problems that develop prior to or during the show are ironed out. One such problem is crossover, or the use of the same concept by two or more members of the show. It is reasoned that if, say, two comics devote substantial parts of their acts to sketches involving driving behaviour, the audience will tire of the subject before the second has finished his or her treatment of it. Conscientious managers and agents who

organize comedy shows several weeks in advance try to prevent crossovers by not booking two similar acts on the same bill.

Comics themselves attempt to solve the problem beforehand, if they are aware of it. But a solution is not always possible. For one, if a local opener uses the same subject that an out-of-towner doing the middle act plans to use, the latter has no way of knowing unless he or she listens to the opener. The first comic may not know what the act of the second contains. Even if the first does know, he or she may not care (it poses no problem for the opener) or may have no material to substitute.[6] Thus, as one seasoned professional observed, "When you're the second comic in this situation, you just have to outdo the first one, or change your act." Professionals who stay in their hotel rooms or arrive for other reasons just before they go onstage miss the opportunity to spot crossovers. They may only learn about it after the fact, when someone explains to them why they had trouble with the section of their act that crossed over.

Another technical problem frequently taken up in the green room is the audience. Hecklers, chatty tables of friends, and unresponsive and listless patrons bring the comics together. Someone may propose a solution, but that is unusual. Talk about a problem audience amounts to little more than catharsis for the returning performer; for the one about to mount the stage, it is an ill omen.

Backstage

There is no true backstage in most Canadian comedy clubs. Off to one side of the stage, perhaps hidden in a passageway or simply standing along a wall, the next comic awaits his or her turn to perform. Many performers prefer to be alone at this point, to pace and to review their act. This is the time for "psyching up," getting in the mood to present humour with energy and the concentration needed to exclude the distractions that can mar an act. This is one time when professionals are particularly unreceptive to questions from amateurs or anyone else.

For those who suffer from it, this is also when stage fright is most acute. It is an emotional state that arises in connection with the problem of sustaining an identity in the face of apprehensiveness about one's ability to do so. It develops when performers know in advance that their performance could bring scrutiny from others, in response to a slip or flaw, or failure (Lyman and Scott 1970, Stebbins 1981).

Table 4
Stage Fright among Stand-up Comics

Response	*Number of Amateurs**	*Number of Professionals**
Always	9	10
Never	2	8
Mild (excited)	12	5
Special circumstances only	3	10

* Totals are greater than the size of each sample because some respondents who ordinarily experienced mild stage fright were more acutely affected in special circumstances.

Table 4 indicates that professional respondents in this study were less likely to have stage fright than amateurs (nine of twenty-six versus ten of thirty-one) and more likely to avoid it altogether. Mild, manageable stage fright and the excitement or anticipation of going onstage are treated here as more or less the same emotion.

There are special circumstances under which professionals are more likely to develop stage fright than amateurs. The professional travels much more, works unfamiliar clubs and audiences, and has a better chance of being evaluated by an agent or television talent scout, a contingency on which a great deal rides. The professional may be uncomfortable working before television cameras. Finally, he or she is required more often than an amateur to prepare new material, the reception of which is unknown. In short, for the majority of professional stand-up comics, stage fright arises only when the performance environment to which they are accustomed changes significantly. Amateurs working within the cocoon of the amateur night in one or two local rooms escape this, at least until they are near promotion to full-time opener.

The acute emotional tension that nearly all our amateur respondents experienced prior to their first night diminished with subsequent performances. Early on some tried to calm their nerves with alcohol, though many realized that they might only be dulling their wits and inviting what they feared most: failure onstage. Others paced, still others smoked. Some did all three:

Ed [pseudonym] was scheduled to go onstage for the first time as a stand-up comic, and as the first of eight amateurs in the evening's open-mike night at Yuk Yuk's in Calgary. He was, by his own description, a wreck. He paced feverishly in the open space before the green room, alternatively drawing on his cigarette and drinking from a glass of beer, while casting a wary glance from time to time at the crowd

of seventy-five or so patrons who had assembled for the evening. As show time approached one wondered if he might not explode with tension. "Holy shit!" he snorted, as he quickened his pace, smacking his closed fist into the palm of the other hand at every other step, "won't this thing ever start?" Approximately ten minutes later he was back in the same area, beaming from ear to ear with the big smile that comes with success ... (Author's fieldnotes)

Pacing, smoking, and drinking, however, are usual in comedy rooms and with experienced performers do not always indicate the jitters. Some respondents said they paced to get in the mood, to generate a nervous edge, or to calm their excitement, not their fear.

A situation that can create significant stage fright in even the most seasoned comic is to have to work a "death set." That is the performing spot following the set of a comic who has just killed and left the stage with the audience howling for more. But they cannot have more, for there are other acts in the show and a limited amount of time for each. If the next performer cannot measure up to the previous act, it will be a letdown for the audience and the comic will likely "die" onstage. The tense situation is only inflamed backstage when the triumphant departing comic challenges his superior (the next act is ranked higher) with a comment like "Follow this!" Most old hands have had to wrestle at least once with a death set:

That was where I had the strangest experience of my career. It was at the Yorkville club [Yuk Yuk's] in downtown Toronto. Norm MacDonald was on before me. He was one the headliners. He had a very strong act during Friday's second show. He went up and was just cutting everybody to pieces. All the other comics were just dying out there [at his superb act]. Well Norm has his special style, he is underanimated. Of course, I'm just the opposite. So it took ten to fifteen minutes to get the audience into my style of comedy. So it was a real clash of styles. I hadn't been onstage five minutes and the sweat's running off my nose. I'm in a hyper state, I'm working my buns off for these guys [audience]. And eventually they came around. (Senior professional, interview with author)

Onstage

In chapter 3 we covered the staging of stand-up comedy and the interaction between comic and audience. We can now add to this picture of the comedy stage a category of occurrences

that may be called "things that go wrong onstage." In comedy, many of them centre on the microphone. For instance, the emcee may arrive onstage primed to open a show with a terrific crowd pleaser only to find that he must shout to the sound booth for power. While I was in the field, I saw the microphone dropped several times. Although this was sometimes done for effect, there were two occasions when the performer had to suspend his act while the damaged mike was replaced.

One night the microphone suddenly sagged in its cradle, which brought American comic Jebb Fink an unexpected round of laughter and which he spontaneously prolonged with the tag: "Oh, the story of my life. It's always going limp when I need it most." One rule in stand-up, not always followed, is for the emcee to adjust the height of the microphone to suit the next performer. Failure to do so can delay and possibly weaken the quick and dramatic start many comics hope for. Experienced professionals usually have a line to two, however, to carry them as the mike is adjusted.

Then there is the crisis of dead batteries in the tape recorders that comics sometimes use onstage. No small number of comics has had to improvise hastily after discovering during their performance that their tape player has little or no power. I saw one opening act leave the stage prematurely for this reason. A headliner, after finding dead batteries, searched the back of the stage for an electrical outlet into which to plug his transformer. He was lucky to find one.

Comics have fallen or nearly fallen onstage. One I was observing actually fell off the stage. No one was hurt and the incident turned out to be an impromptu crowd pleaser (it seems everybody loves a pratfall). One middle act spent close to twenty additional minutes onstage trying to keep the show going while the emcee and management telephoned frantically around the city for the headliner. He lived in town and could have been stranded. In the midst of this search he strode through the door and onto the stage.

The Comedy Room

The comedy club has other functions besides providing entertainment. At the back of the room, or more rarely to one side of it, but never far from the greenroom, participants in a show and local comics frequently gather to watch the acts. This, as previously noted, is a hard group to please. Comics are a jaded

bunch who know the stock lines and themes. They are not inclined to laugh much at what is happening onstage unless, of course, a famous headliner is present. Fortunately for less talented performers, this little coterie cannot be seen or heard easily from the brightly lit stage before a noisy crowd.

Yet these colleagues do sometimes help the person onstage. Their very presence discourages line stealing, a surreptitious activity that is most effectively accomplished in dark corners. On nights when the house is small, they may act as a supportive claque, laughing uproariously and applauding boisterously at every joke or line. There is a risk to this: the comic may begin playing to the gang near the green room, improvising with wisecracks and private jokes that leave the naïve paying audience in the dark.

After the show, when the lights are turned on, the back of the comedy room can become a sort of reception hall. Here comics who have had a good night may find themselves showered with compliments, questioned about their careers, advised on how to improve their acts, and perhaps invited to a party later that evening. Here performers and their hecklers make their peace or continue their verbal sparring, as in the following incident (to protect those concerned I have substituted names, using those of the performers in our fictitious show at Foibles in chapter 3):

Emcee Ed Farley started out the show with his usually aggressive act. He soon became aware that Sharon, a member of the audience, was celebrating her birthday that evening. Since it was Thursday and the room was less than half full, here was an easy opportunity for some banter between him and her. But as Sharon became drunker, she began to interrupt Farley. Ed tried to build rapport by buying her a drink. Perhaps he had provoked her with too many heckler lines. Later he presented her with a house cake and organized the singing of "Happy Birthday." But all to no avail. Subsequent performers came on stage. Sharon filled their pauses with comments and broke into their lines with questions and comments. This brought a barrage of antiheckler tactics, including a brusk "Shut up!" from one of them.

Still she persisted. The headliner, Joel Slivitz, thought that inviting her onstage to tell a joke or two might be embarrassing enough to dampen her spirits. Even that failed. Then he tried to turn the audience against her, which produced some derisive laughs. Undaunted she continued, so that Joel's act eventually

deteriorated into a verbal skirmish between the two of them and the rest of the audience lost interest.

After the show Sharon ran into Ed, Joel, and opener Micky Finn near the women's washroom. She was surprised to learn that she had caused them no end of trouble that evening. She blamed her drunkenness and birthday celebration. To show that no harm was meant, she planted a big kiss on Slivitz's lips and left the club. Slivitz turned toward the green room wiping off the kiss with disgust, as if to rid himself of every trace of the person and the evening that would probably rank as one of his worst experiences on the comedy stage.

With the show over and the crowd finally cleared, many comedy rooms turn into private after-hours clubs. This is the time to hang out, often near the green room, to review the evening and talk about comedy. The conversational content is an extension of the talk in the green room, but now the atmosphere is more relaxed with the pressure to perform gone. For professionals it is a time of casual leisure, for amateurs serious leisure, another opportunity to learn about the comedy career and pick up an artistic pointer or two. Later, some or all of this little group may drift off to a hotel room to watch late-night comedy on television or to an all-night restaurant for dinner (many comics prefer to eat lightly before shows). For amateurs included in such company, this is a heady experience. For most professionals, unless they are working in their home town, it is just another night on the road.

CHAPTER SIX

The Road

"The road" symbolizes many things in the career of the professional comic. For example, the first remunerated road trip (as opposed to an unremunerated showcase trip) is a sign that the young comic has entered the career stage of establishment and acquired the occupational status of a professional entertainer. Amateurs look forward to going on the road for this reason alone.

But life of the road loses its appeal for most performers. They come to yearn for a work routine that has them employed in one city, with perhaps a few trips each year to give concerts and perform sets in the better clubs. When comics develop to the point where they can command the most prized work in town often enough to make a respectable living, they have entered the maintenance stage of the career. In both stages, establishment and maintenance, the road is a significant measure of status and seniority.

This chapter centres on the professional comic. In general, as the professional moves toward and into the maintenance stage, his or her contact with amateurs decreases accordingly. On the road, however, the amateur continues to be a significant part of the comedy room scene.

ARE STAND-UP COMICS PROFESSIONALS?

Common sense has it that a worker is professional when he or she works full-time and is paid enough to live on. Yet most occupations are full time and provide a living, which means these two criteria are of no use is determining whether full-time

comics are truly professional. Instead, professional status can be determined by reference to the nine attributes that comprise the ideal concept of professional.[1]

Let me make clear that, in using what occupational sociologists call the attributional approach, I am not claiming as they have historically that professions are a superior category of occupations. Moreover, it is difficult to argue that the art, sport, and entertainment professions have exceptional power in society, a position taken by sociologists who find fault with the attributional approach. Chapter 7 shows why their alternative approach fails to hold in these fields. Our question here, more specifically, is whether comics meet these attributes within the same limits of variation as other professionals.

First, professionals produce a product that is not standardized. One of the essential qualities of an artistic product of any kind is its uniqueness; no artist can or would want to copy someone else's work. This holds for comics. Timing and rhythm alone force variation since, as noted earlier, audiences are different, which means they respond in different ways to the same lines. Additional variation comes with audience banter, improvised quips, and changes forced on prepared material by shifts in the comic's mood and the idiosyncrasies of a room. In short, much of this variation comes from trying to serve the clientele, the audience.

Second, professionals in general are will versed in an exclusive body of theoretical or abstract knowledge. To be sure, the knowledge of the comic is not as abstract or theoretical as that of the lawyer or physician. Yet the professional comic must know and apply many of the principles of good theatre and good comedy, which involve eye contact, voice projection, verbal diction, physical gesture, vocal inflection, effective rhythm and timing, and so forth. Although most comics reject manuals for artistic development, there are books on how to become a stand-up comic (e.g., Allen 1987; Belzer 1988) which contain lengthy discussions of these principles and many others.

Third, professionals identify with their colleagues, with whom they constitute a select group. A number of conditions foster this in the world of stand-up. Working by night and sleeping by day separates comics from conventionally employed people, as does comics' tendency to poke fun at or be critical of everyday social conventions and moral problems. The rigours of the road and the trials of trying to succeed are experiences that bring them together. Difficult rooms and audiences encourage comics

to circle the wagons against an invasion of bourgeois sentiments and behaviour. And shared feelings and beliefs about agents and managers help build a special sense of identity.

Fourth, professionals are intimate with the culture associated with their profession. For comics, this culture includes the great performers of the past and present, some of whom were early sources of inspiration. It includes the famous comedy clubs, centres of comedy, and comedy chains and circuits. Then there is the linguistic component of the culture – the stock heckler lines, the popular subjects of comedy, and the array of in-group terms (*bombing, killing, dying, follow this*, etc.).

Fifth, professionals use institutionalized means of evaluating the training and competence of individuals. The training of comics is certainly not validated or certified in the same formal way as the training of, say, physicians and schoolteachers. But rigorous evaluation does take place. The performer must be good enough to be promoted to the status of an opening act, a decision made by a manager or an agent or both and one based on audience appeal. One cannot simply claim to be a professional stand-up comic and find work in the comedy clubs of Canada.

Sixth, professional work is a calling whose practitioners apply standards and services framed in a code of ethics and regard this as more important than material rewards. The rewards of stand-up make it clear that comics pursue their art for reasons other than remuneration. Most professional Canadian comics earn a modest living, which is nonetheless seen as worth it because it enables them to reap the powerful reward of making people laugh. To this end comics must spend long hours writing, rehearsing, experimenting, rewriting, and performing. Those who make comedy their calling combine the work habits of a monk, the insight of a novelist, the determination of a mountain climber, the imperturbability of a politician, and the onstage personality of Mr or Ms Wonderful.

Seventh, professionals are recognized by their clients as members of a profession with authority based on knowledge of and experience in their speciality. The public is of two minds here. On the one hand, they recognize that there are full-time, moderately well-paid entertainers called stand-up comics whose ability to make people laugh is remarkable. On the other hand, many think it is easy to make people laugh (as the comics themselves did before their first night onstage). Therefore this is the sole attribute of the nine under consideration that is open to question.

Eighth, professional work provides an avenue for frequent realization of important social values. There is one such value, possibly two, realized through stand-up comedy. The first, about which there is no doubt, is entertainment. Put simply and directly, Canadians, like other Western peoples, want to be entertained, and stand-up comedy can satisfy this desire. The second, laughing at the unlaughable, is realized to the extent that it can be scientifically demonstrated that people do laugh in this manner and that the laughing is a form of catharsis.

Ninth, professional work is self-regulated or autonomous. Comedy is clearly this, given the freedom of its practitioners to write, interpret, and improvise. The only effective constraints on artistic freedom here are those of the marketplace. For comics this means whether the audience sees their offerings as funny. No matter what the content of an act, if there is laughter, the professional service is good. Certainly there is no other profession with more autonomy than stand-up comedy.

And so it can be said that stand-up comics are indeed professionals. At least in this rough analysis, they meet the nine attributes of the ideal professional better than many other occupational groups. At the same time, they do not meet some of the attributes as well as certain other professions, for example, law, medicine, engineering, and teaching.

QUITTING THE DAY JOB

Quitting a day job is at once a comic's major career turning point and the transition between development and establishment. However, not every comic who makes this transition quits a day job. A small number of both samples of respondents were unemployed at the time they moved into professional comedy. A handful of others free-lanced in occupations that were hardly disturbed by extensive night bookings or road trips. A few were living with their parents or with a girlfriend, boyfriend, or spouse who supported them during the lean months of early establishment.

But the large majority had to decide when to abandon a day job (for some a night job) of considerable importance to their financial survival and, in rare instances, that of a spouse and possibly children. The decision to do so was usually reached in consultation with a booking agent or room manager who gave "reasonable" assurances that he or she could offer enough work to the protégé to bring in a minimally acceptable income. Work typically consisted of a combination of weekend opening spots

in local and regional comedy rooms, weekday emcee duties, and one-night stands at out-of-town satellite establishments. This base was augmented with special gigs such as stags, parties, and local conventions. This is paid work. It is also work that more senior professionals try to avoid.

It should be noted, in passing, that today's recently promoted professionals find steady employment more quickly than the junior professionals of the 1970s and early 1980s. In those days there was much less work for comics, and it tended to be scattered in one-night stands and weekend engagements throughout a region. It was also more difficult for an agent to guarantee regular employment, which meant that young comics of professional quality had to make ends meet by working full or part time during the day. The advent of the comedy chain, the comedy circuit, and the booking agent's network has made steady work a realistic possibility for the freshly minted professional.

Many questions go through the young comic's mind at this point in a career. One is the question of identity: When does one become a real comic? Some performers like this respondent feel that they must be working full time to qualify for this title: "Although the four months prior to quitting my day job, I was making enough to live on comedy, I didn't take that step. I wanted to be sure. That is, I would never tell people until I did quit it that I was a comedian. I would never say, "No, I'm a comedian." Rather, I would say, "I sell shoes, but I'm working at being a comedian." You're not a comedian until you're in it full time." Others wonder if their humour would be appreciated in other parts of the country and in other rooms.

In this occupation as in many others, newcomers benefit greatly from sponsors. In comedy sponsors are booking agents, room managers, and influential senior comics. Except for the agency Yuk Yuk's Funny Business, which books performers throughout the Yuk Yuk's chain, among other places, no agent, manager, or senior comic directly controls enough work to grant a living to a protégé. Rather, he or she recommends the comic to other employers (usually room managers) who accept his or her word that the comic will perform acceptably at the recommended level. Although some performers at this stage of a career may try to promote themselves, everyone I interviewed or casually discussed the matter with seemed at least partly dependent on one or two sponsors for getting established, and particularly for making the transition from a day job to full-time employment in entertainment.

It should be remembered here that the day job of the typical

late amateur/early professional was, compared with comedy, most uninspiring. The desire to leave it as soon as possible was evident in many of the interviews, not only for this reason but also because a comic when free from daytime obligations can write and rehearse more and take road gigs when they come along. These considerations encouraged many to abandon their livelihood and live marginally, often for several months, until full-time work in comedy was available.

Fifty-eight percent, or eleven of the nineteen amateurs with day jobs, said their work interfered in one way or another with comedy. For some this was evening work that keep them from performing. For others it was work that required them to leave the comedy club earlier than usual. Nearly half the amateur sample also reported that their day job left them fatigued, which affected their performance during the evening. Moreover, nearly all the interviewees with day jobs said they thought continuously about comedy, sometimes at the expense of those jobs. Many kept a notebook handy for jotting down ideas during the day. Several who drove cars or trucks for a living used the time to create new concepts, rewrite existing lines, plan onstage interpretations, and the like.

In sum, a decision was made by respondents at this transitional point in their careers to strive for full-time work in comedy. The dilemma was not whether should they quit their day job but when they should quit it to maximize success and minimize financial hardship. The dilemma was normally resolved early in the stage of establishment.

GETTING ESTABLISHED

In its broadest sense, getting established in stand-up comedy means building a reputation sufficient to reach the career stage of maintenance. Establishment consists of five processes: getting experience, developing an act, selling oneself as a comic, advancing to better performing spots, and relating to others in the industry. Let us turn to the first of these.

Getting Experience

One reason the road is inescapable for the junior professional is the widely held belief among agents and room managers that four to six months must pass to regenerate local interest in a comic after he or she has played in a particular club or satellite

room. This person may play later, even the next day, in another establishment in the same city, for it is likely to serve a different clientele. But most room managers prefer to have someone who is fresh to the entire community.[2] This forces many professionals in the establishment stage – the "road warriors" – to keep moving around the country.

For the comic, the first performance or two in a room or club is usually the most unsettling of all his or her performances there. Will the act succeed outside a comic's hometown or province? Will it succeed in other clubs in the same city? Stage fright is commonly acute and remains so until the comic learns how to handle each new audience and identify local interests and problems. Several respondents mentioned that Jewish jokes generally fare well in Toronto but fall flat in Calgary and Edmonton, where Jewish culture is less familiar. They encountered an opposite pattern of reception when they delivered jokes about Southeast Asians. The goal of the new comic is to establish with each new audience that he or she is funny. That depends on how the audience interprets the material.

Playing different clubs in unfamiliar cities is bad enough. Working the satellite gigs nearby is even worse. Most of these are hell gigs where the audience is drunk and distracted by other activities, including games (darts, cards), television (sports), and social interaction (the opposite sex, teammates doing a post-mortem on a sports contest). Satellite gigs usually take place in a small city, which leads to further problems if the performer, for instance, looks or acts eccentric by semirural standards. Additionally, the humour is likely to be big-city humour – along with these other conditions, a recipe for bombing. For these reasons satellite gigs pay well: aspiring professionals must grin and bear it, for they need the money.

A few satellite gigs are not in rural or semirural areas and are not hell to play. If they are close to a large city and reasonably pleasant to work, the more senior professionals tend to get them. The early professionals are left with the dregs – jobs at stags, biker bars, rock bars, college pub nights, and wet t-shirt contests where comics are treated either as background, like piped-in music, or as toys to be played with. This is the lot of both anglophone and francophone comics. It is even occasionally the lot of ranking professionals for comedy clubs are not safe from this sort of thing.

The silver lining in this cloud is that hell gigs and road trips develop versatility, which helps the comic succeed under varied

conditions. Professionals who reach the maintenance stage of their career are admirably versatile. They prefer to avoid hell gigs, but they can play them effectively if need be. Headliners may find the comedy club, especially during Friday night's second show, equally challenging. He or she may suddenly have to change delivery or switch material after a death set, facing a laughed-out audience, or dealing with a crossover. A versatile comic, to maintain audience interest and control, may swear more or less than normally, substitute appropriate monologues, engage in more audience banter than usual, or call upon a reserve of stock insults and heckler lines.[3]

The fact of a comic's versatility soon circulates among room managers. A versatile comic will likely have fewer problems in the comedy club and at satellite bookings. The manager, often instrumental in arranging the latter, wants all to go well. Versatile comics can perform at a rural bar, a yuppie lounge, and a university concert over a period of several days in one town.

In all this there is a certain separation of the sexes. Female comics, unfairly or not, are thought by some agents and managers to be incapable of performing well at the rougher satellite gigs. In addition, women often have their own clientele. Female entertainers are often preferred at such events as ladies' nights, fashion shows, and women's conventions and fund-raising banquets. Still, versatility is important for the female performer. The women at a fashion show and those in a typical comedy club on a Friday night are two different audiences.

Developing an Act

Versatility is not to be sought at the expense of style. The amateur who has just been promoted to opening spots typically lacks a unique style. To become established is to become distinct, and if that distinctness proves pleasing to the audience, it will carry a comic into the maintenance stage of a career.

Versatility is professional insurance against unemployment, but it alone cannot send the comic to the big time. Performers who are merely versatile and have nothing else to offer are common denominators, all things to all people, "generic Joes," as American comic Drake Sather described them. Those who attain headliner and television status understand this pitfall and have avoided it. They have developed a unique style, a genuine advantage in landing higher-level bookings. They run out their generic material at those satellite gigs where nothing else will work. And success

based on an attractive, distinctive style means the comic will have less and less call to prostitute his or her talents in this manner.

A comic can develop distinctiveness by "cleaning up his or her act for television." Television in the late 1980s is clearly less prudish than it was even ten years ago, and that includes network television. Nonetheless, the candid, gesturing, four-letter-word treatments of sexually-loaded subjects, known as "dick jokes" and heard in many comedy clubs in Canada, are too strong for ordinary television, the late-night shows of Carson and Letterman included. (Can you imagine Eddie Murphy's *Raw* or the film starring Tom Hanks and Sally Fields, *Punchlines,* playing in your living room at eight o'clock in the evening?)

Those young professionals whose success has been achieved on the stepladder of dick jokes must eventually change their acts.[4] For many this entails a change in speech habits. For example, it would seem perfectly natural for men to use *fucking* (the "F-word") in their acts, as many do in everyday talk with the guys. After all, modern comedy is conversational. But, whereas the network television of today might tolerate the word once in a ten-minute spot, it would never tolerate it in every third sentence. And it would certainly not tolerate language such as the "C-word" (*cunt*), the use of which is known among comics as "going over the edge" of acceptability. The versatile performer may need this word and a rather sizeable list of others like it to kill at the next rock bar gig, but they will have to be abandoned if the comic is to achieve a distinct and clean style of comedy.

All this does not mean, however, that there can be no talk of sex on television or at locations demanding clean comedy – concerts, conventions, prestigious nightclubs, and respectable private parties. The comic must use innuendo and euphemisms for crude-sounding four-letter words. So a versatile male comic with a distinctive style might refer to his penis at a stag as his cock, but call it his little willie in an otherwise identical line delivered at a yuppie comedy club in a metropolitan suburb. Needless to say, the word penis is too ordinary and clinical for use in an entertainment context.

From the stage of development through that of establishment, most women in comedy struggle with this question of whether to "work blue." For them, working blue is not an extension of street life, as it is for many men, but rather an attempt, made in the interest of success, to be like male comics who appear

to be succeeding on account of dick jokes. Many amateur and early professional females wrestle with this problem: whether to retain their femininity and risk failure, or renounce it in certain ways and increase the chance of success. Added to this tension is the opposition of some women in the audience to blue comedy done by female comics. An advanced female amateur explains:

It's especially true for a woman, because there is such a fine line about what is acceptable. Really, I shouldn't care to the extent that I should have to put the reins on ... I should try this, I should be a pioneer. A guy can come out and do dick jokes and stuff like that. I remember this one bit that I did. My roommate just screamed in the audience, she was so shocked that I would even say anything like that ... The audience liked it. But when I got offstage people were saying, "You really shouldn't be doing that." I said, "Well, you know you guys talk about masturbation." Now, I could really have some funny tasteful bits about things like that, because no one really talks about it. Actually, the first night that I went out [onstage] ... this girl came backstage. I guess that I had said *fuck* about ten times or something. And she said, "Honey, I think you shouldn't say that onstage. You don't need to do that sort of thing." I thought, gee, I did that mostly out of nervousness ... But there are definitely some things that are looked down upon. Like, this one time I came out and talked about sanipads. "The advertising people make us buy these things by like the truckloads. I really think we should be using [them for] something else." Then I took out a couple and began to make rabbits ears out of them and this and that. I actually had a group of women hiss at me in the audience. "My God," I thought, "this is an everyday sort of thing." It's easy stuff to joke about and men make so many jokes about it that – what's the big deal anyway? It's sort of like the condom jokes, they're getting very tired. But when women do these things, they're sort of "dirty." Women don't do that you know [said mockingly]. Like who is this dirty little girl here up onstage? It's a funny deal.

The first woman comic I saw I didn't like at all. She came out onstage and said, "OK all you assholes out there, you jerks." That really pissed me off. Then she kept on that way. And I thought, "Do I want to be like that? Like I'm a woman, but I'm tough." To me a woman doing comedy is like a different view on various things. "Gee, you see it that way, but what if we look at it this way?" This is refreshing, too.

Eventually women learn just as men do that the most prestigious work in stand-up requires humour that is largely clean.

The conflict of values considered here is most intense for amateur and junior professional female performers who have yet to understand this or who, if they do understand, feel their audiences will not accept clean humour.

In part, the conflict stems from the viewpoint, expressed earlier with reference to women comics and their parents, that women should not be in comedy at all. Furthermore, strong opposition to female performers has been expressed by male performers from the beginning. Mark Twain considered Kate Field, known as The Rose of the Rostrum, as

> one of the insignificants. He did not think highly of women lecturers in general, except perhaps of Ann Dickinson, although he admitted that they did well enough with "Tenderness, pathos, tragedy – the earnest, the beautiful, the majestic." That a woman should attempt a humorous talk he thought "the ghastliest conception to which the human mind has yet given birth – wholly out of the question." Puzzled by female presumption, he was especially perplexed by the success of Miss Field. Twenty-eight years later he rated her among the house-emptiers. Her platform manner, he said, "was poor and her delivery repellently artificial," yet she was good enough to earn $10,000 a year. He must have forgotten that he had once thought better of her, for she was leading woman, opposite Raymond, in the dramatization of *The Gilded Age.* Contemporary criticism praised her ease, vivacity, intense earnestness, and reformer's zeal as journalist, author, actress, and lecturer. A versatile woman of strong, if eccentric, intellectual gifts, Kate Field was not the fleeting incompetent of his unreliable memory. (Fatout 1960, 146)

Some of the conditions behind this attitude have yet to change. Mark Breslin addresses them in an interview conducted by John Oakley:

> JOHN: Is the number of women in comedy proportionate to the advances women have made in other fields, such as politics, or even other branches of the arts?
>
> MARK: Definitely not! First of all, stand-up comedy is one of the last bastions of male heterosexual machismo in show business. There's a very high correlation between stand-up comics and jocks. Very few homosexual males are in stand-up comedy. This is very interesting considering there are so many in the theatre and music. Women are not becoming successful by and large as stand-up comics because it's a very direct affront to some people's notion of what women are all about. In other words, to stand on stage is de facto an aggressive act

and women are not supposed to be aggressive. People are not comfortable with that, so right away a woman's got something going against her. Remember the class clown? How many times can you remember the class clown ever being a woman? The class clown was always a guy.

JOHN: Interesting insights. And possibly grist for a master's paper at some university.

MARK: This is a very important point. Women are "supposed" to be passive. They're "supposed" to be accepting. It's rampant right through the culture. And for a woman to stand up there and say "I'm going to control you! I'm going to make you laugh!" is just like a woman saying "I'm going to take you to bed and I'm going to make you into my lover." Most men would react by going limp immediately. And most women would react by saying "Slut! Whore! Bitch!" So I see it as a sexual thing. It's a sexual problem that men find hard to take and women are resentful about. (Oakley 1983, 27)

Another aspect of development in the establishment stage is handling advice. Advice comes from two principal sources: audience members and colleagues, both amateur and professional. Many a comic can recount stories about how someone from the audience came up after the show with a joke, concept, or anecdote, introducing it with a comment such as, "Here, take this, you can add it to your act." The very fact that such advice is so freely given tells us something about the public image of stand-up comedy as an easy pursuit – anyone can create funny material. The gesture is naïve, however, for a new idea must complement a comic's repertoire and personality as well. Moreover, the performer may sense from experience that the proffered notion has scant potential. Consider the following incident taken from my field notes: The headliner and I were taking near the door of the room at Calgary's Brass Cat Comedy Theatre when a male member of the audience in his early twenties approached us. He was clearly excited about the show he had just seen and complimented the headliner for his fine performance. Then the man pointed to the door of the men's washroom and observed that, because there was no handle, it was not clear whether the door could be opened from one side or the other. "Perhaps you can do something with that," the fellow said. The headliner, who had been in this situation many times, replied, "I'll spend all day tomorrow working on that one. Many thanks."

When advice is not coming from someone in the audience, it is coming from another comic. In general, professionals reject

advice from this source too. Some, however, will accept it from a respected professional or, more rarely, from an amateur. Nineteen of the twenty-seven professional respondents who had routine contact with amateurs said they were approached from time to time by amateurs with a tip on an aspect of their act.[5] About half of the nineteen said they occasionally accepted these ideas, but the ratio of acceptances to rejections was low.

The amateurs did not always see the professionals at their best. Several professionals pointed out that amateurs often see them when they are trying out or working through new material during an amateur or showcase night. More rarely a professional, after having been away from active performing for some time, may try to reestablish his or her facility – to prepare, say, for a tour or concert – during a showcase night where many amateurs are present.

Advice is offered by amateurs because they feel it is warranted. All but two of our twenty-six amateur respondents identified in interviews one or more flaws occasionally or frequently committed by professional comics. These included arrogance, weak timing, poor theatricality, too much banter, and too much blue or hackneyed material.

To be sure, outstanding performers were seldom cited for such blemishes. It was the junior professionals who were most criticized and who were held by the amateurs to be little better, if any, than themselves. While none in the amateur sample said that he or she was more competent than the junior professionals, twenty-one of the twenty-six respondents firmly believed that they could hold their own against one of them if both were given fifteen minutes onstage. If the amateurs saw a difference here, it was that they performed well less consistently. The weaker professionals were seen as presenting hackneyed material more often than the amateur.

Selling Oneself

From interviews and casual conversations, I was able to identify two related kinds of self-promotion. The first is promoting an act to agents and room managers. Several opening-act and some middle-act professionals as well as some late amateurs described how they travelled to one or more cities in Canada and the United States to showcase their wares. Some went to one city for a week or two, Toronto being a common destination for many Canadians. Others toured several states and provinces for

two or three months, getting experience and making contacts they hoped would pay off in future bookings and referrals. Comics are paid little or nothing for these efforts.

Some comedy clubs, notably Punchlines and Yuk Yuk's Yorkville club in Toronto, set aside a night or two to showcase local and visiting talent. At this time several acts of approximately fifteen minutes each are delivered to the audience, which is aware that, on the whole, it is getting better comedy than it would on amateur nights but worse comedy than it would from Thursday night on. Less active rooms accommodate their smaller number of showcase requests with the "guest set." The manager, once convinced that a visiting comic will perform acceptably, offers a fifteen- to twenty-minute spot in one of the regular Thursday or weekend shows.

Showcasing is often an expensive undertaking, especially for those who do it most – the junior professionals whose financial resources are at their lowest ebb. The costs of meals, lodging, and travel have driven many comics to produce videotapes of their acts, which they mail to agents and managers in hope of finding work. Though less ideal than the live performance, this strategy sometimes results in an otherwise-sight-unseen invitation to perform for a weekend in some distant room.

The second kind of self-promotion is developing and maintaining an acceptable personal appearance. For the anglophone comics of this study, most of whom wear no costumes, this is a critical question. Should they wear the same clothing onstage that they wear off? Should they dress in showy entertainer's garb, in velvety things with flashy colours and accessories? Should their hair be stylish or more ordinary?

These questions pester many comics in their early years. Junior amateurs tend to go onstage dressed casually – for example, the men in blue jeans and a sport shirt, the women in pants and a blouse. This is how they would dress for a comedy show were they in the audience. But then they receive conflicting advice. One person may say to dress casually like the audience. Another may advise showing respect for the audience by dressing up, but not to the extent that they would appear snobbish. Others say that since audiences tend to dress more casually for weekday performances and more formally for weekend performances, the comic's attire should follow suit.

Personal feelings about clothing also enter the picture. Many young amateurs rarely have reason to dress in anything but jeans and sneakers. They would feel awkward, even onstage,

clothed more formally. Later, as they come to think of themselves more as comics and get better at their art, many start to dress more fashionably or more formally or both. A male amateur who began six years ago performing five-minute spots in jeans and a sweatshirt today could well be headlining on weekends in a suit and tie. A female comic in the same career path might have graduated to a dress, skirt, or stylish pants.

For women, the issue of clothing automatically raises the conflict discussed earlier. Both men and women like to dress in ways that make them physically attractive. But when a female comic does this, it can detract from her act. Here the female amateur who was quoted earlier on the subject of women and blue comedy discusses the dress problem for women:

> When I first started, I thought about what I should do. I was also trying to think of what I should wear. I don't want to go onstage looking like everybody else, I want to go on looking like a woman. So I wore nice clothes, but that didn't work at all. The sort of stuff that I wear is low cut. One of the guys said, "You know you really can't do that. All they'll do is stare at your boobs. They won't listen to you." If I could work this into my act, if there was a reason for me wearing this, then it would have worked better, but there wasn't. So then I decided that I just wanted to go with a sort of androgynous look. Next week I think I will go out with all sorts of balloons tied to me and tell them, the audience, that every time they laugh I'll pop one of them.

Comics, both male and female, have speculated about whether a dress or skirt reduces a woman's onstage authority and control by calling attention to her femininity. But to female headliners who work in such clothing audiences appear to be no less receptive.

Advancement

Advancement continues to be a central concern for professionals at the establishment stage. If the career is going well, promotion can move a performer from opening acts to middle acts and from there to emceeing and ultimately to headlining and career maintenance. It should be understood, however, that at this point promotion in comedy is not as defined a process as promotion in organizations. A comic gradually plays more middle or headlining spots and fewer lower-ranking spots. Promotion

to advanced levels of stand-up unfolds over time; it does not occur on a specific date like a promotion to sergeant, office manager, or associate professor. Promotions and special-performance opportunities are nevertheless seen as significant career advances and the second most prevalent thrill in comedy by both amateurs and professionals (see table 2).

For the comic, the issue of promotion evokes intense insecurity. To be sure, promotion ultimately rests on audience response to his or her material. But it is an agent or manger who does the promoting, not the audience. Comics are tormented throughout the establishment period of their career with questions: How do I stack up against the other comics in the chain, circuit, or agent's stable? What opinion does the agent or manager have of my act? Is this person discriminating against me?

Comics frequently asked me what I thought of their act, for by the time I had been in the field for several months, it could be reasonably assumed that I had developed a practised eye and ear for comedy. I was one of the few people they met from whom they expected a neutral and an informed evaluation, a rare opportunity that many of them did not let slip by.

With certain exceptions, a promotion is a turning point that hinges on the promoted person's demonstrated capacity to fill the new role. The exceptions are people unqualified to be promoted but nonetheless are because the person doing the promoting fails to see the disqualifying weaknesses in their act or chooses to overlook them.

But even where promotion is earned, luck or breaks, or contingencies as we are calling them here, may influence it. Comics, like people in other lines of work, were quick to point out that breaks affect their careers and those of their colleagues. It is a lucky break when the opening act becomes ill and a local amateur is asked to fill in; when a performer kills the night a television scout is in the house; or when two comics meet as part of a show, hit it off, and eventually decide to work as a duo. A well-established professional talks about one of his most special lucky breaks:

> The [Steve] Landesberg thing was the biggest break for me, because it was the biggest show that had come to Vancouver for a long time. They contacted me directly to do it, to do the opening [act]. To be home and to do a high-level thing like that was great. They asked me if I wanted to do the opening, but I was supposed to be working in Portland that weekend. I was going to get $250 to do five shows there.

Or I could receive $300 to do fifteen minutes at a big theatre in my hometown. So I phoned to see if I could get out of the weekend gig. Well, as it happened, the club had closed down and they never bothered phoning and telling me this. So I was clear, I did the Landesberg show and it was great. That was a stroke of luck. That was the greatest single thrill of my career.

Relationships

The most widely discussed relations in career establishment are politics, an extension of similar concerns at the amateur level. Although not listed as a dislike by professional respondents, a number of them still felt that favouritism and bias were prominent forces in their occupation. Some argued that it helps to have a powerful and influential sponsor who can aid, if not actually effect, promotion to middle, emcee, and headliner spots.

A major difference between the situation of amateurs and that of professionals is the scope of politics – regional or national. Favouritism or bias leads to more (or less) work from a certain agent than is objectively justifiable. All categories of professionals, men and women, anglophone and francophone, complained about the tendency of agents to develop selective lists of acts they want to promote to their clients (rooms, bars, nightclubs, etc.). Those not on a list felt they were much less likely to be marketed as possible acts. A female professional explained how this practice affected her: "It's really disappointing that you can't get auditions for the exciting shows and festivals and that sort of thing. You have to have pull with an agency. I mean they have their little stable of favourites and I can't seem to break into it. That's fine, I'm just going around it. I don't think I will ever be on top of the list with [agency]. I have friends in the office, and they overheard a phone call when [the agent] was there. Somebody called on the phone asking for a woman to audition for some shows, and he said, 'We don't have anybody.'"

Some female comics complained that certain agents, in an apparent gesture of protection, refused to book women into small-town bars because they were too rough. Yet these bars are seldom patronized only by men; rather they tend to be rowdy working-class gathering spots for both sexes, singles or dating couples.

An additional set of relations between professionals and club mangers is, by contrast, more practical, but nonetheless at times irritating for comics. Falling under the heading of exploitation

are such demands on the performers by management as the promotion of drinks, food, and coming attractions (both comics and other entertainment). They may be asked to put in a plug for the hotel restaurant. One hears appeals from time to time to tip the waitresses or applaud their efficient service. One professional described how he was required to take tickets at the door prior to his own performance. The emcee for the evening is most likely to be exploited in this manner.

LIFE ON THE ROAD

The following figures demonstrate how significant the road is for the Canadian stand-up comic. Seventeen of the twenty-seven professionals for whom I have data on this subject spent, at the time of the interviews, between 70 and 98 percent of their performing days in other towns and cities.[6] Seven more comics spent between 50 and 70 percent of their performing days this way. For fifteen of twenty-eight interviewees, road trips averaged two weeks in length; for five more, three to four weeks; and for still another five, no more than a week. Depending on how much performing time is spent on the road, a comic might have anywhere from a couple of days to a month or more at home before embarking on another trip. This analysis excludes cruise-ship comics, who may be away from home for one to three months.

Thus the road is a major part of life for most Canadian professionals. The figures however, distort the actual life-style of the senior professional, for they refer only to time devoted to stand-up comedy. The senior comic spends considerable time at home writing, making commercials, and working in film and television, among other activities. Seventy to 80 percent of the time spent performing live comedy is necessarily spent on the road, but comics well along in their careers devote only a modest proportion of total work time to live comedy.

The rigours of the road have led Yuk Yuk's to try to limit the trips of its comics to a maximum of three weeks, a policy that no doubt affects considerably the data just presented. Although a few performers seem to thrive on the life-style of the road, most struggle with the social and psychological problems that it generates. Yuk Yuk's policy helps contain these, to be sure. And it appears to be a workable strategy for all concerned, even though many comics are attracted to the road for its financial benefits. It pays better than equivalent work at

home. The satellite gigs within a day's drive of a comic's home or base city are still more lucrative.

As table 3 indicates, the road was one of the second most prominent dislikes among the professionals. The attractions of partying, meeting people, and seeing different parts of the country lose their appeal over the years. Loneliness sets in, and comics find it difficult not to follow a daily routine. An American comic who spends 60 percent of his working days touring Canada and the United States described it this way:

I don't think I've ever wished that I had chosen another job. But I get real lonely at times, and those are the times that I wish that I wasn't ... Well, it's like I told you last night, there are people on this planet whom I would just love to love. And I don't have time to do it. I'm not around. I can't involve myself in that, because if I do, I might not involve myself in what I'm doing. So I think loneliness is a big factor and you find that everybody has their own personal ways of dealing with it. Maybe some don't feel it. I've always been really heavily anchored. My family life was very solid when I was growing up. It has always been a real priority for me. So you deal with it in different ways. I keep in fairly good touch with my good friends mostly by phone at the weirdest times of night. They're kind of used to it now ...

I try to keep myself fairly up on current events and I try to keep myself fairly involved with physical activity when I'm on the road. I try to keep a routine going. If I can play golf, I play golf; I travel with my clubs. If I can play racketball, I play racketball ... [B]ecause if you're working in bars you drink a lot. Some people don't drink. There's a big incidence [*sic*] now of really successful guys who just don't drink at all any more. I'm Irish and I do drink. But I have to be able to counteract that during the day with some sort of work-oriented or physically-oriented behaviour to keep me sane.

There's a lot of guys out there that just sit all day long. They get up do the show, stay up real late, sleep all day long, and have a headache in the morning. I just can't do that. I feel guilty about it. It's not good for you, and you have wasted a day ... I don't [always] set an alarm, but my own rhythm wakes me up generally no later than nine-thirty. I get up in the morning and have breakfast or lunch, whatever. I try to read about four hours a day, pleasure reading. Everything that I do can involve itself in my show. It's pleasure reading, but if I pick up something from pleasure reading, it can find its way into the act sooner or later. I try to write a little bit everyday, but a lot of times I don't. Because the road is your home, you can't treat

it like you're on vacation. And that's real easy to do. You can treat it like a vacation, but you're going to die in about a year and a half. So you try to just keep the same routine that you have when you are at home. You just try to keep yourself sane.

Because you are not around a peer group or a group of good friends, a lot of times you get real isolated. Problems come along and who do I run to, who do I trust with this kind of thing? There's nobody there, so you try to keep yourself as healthy as possible, mentally, so that those things don't happen very often. And when they do happen you just have to have a firm base for dealing with them. The main problem is the isolation. But nobody is holding a gun to my head; I could quit, I could find another option. I could go back to waiting on tables. But the financial rewards are good, the rewards of just doing it are good. I'm never disappointed.

Other problems are material – the quality of food and lodging. Of course, there is no cooking like home cooking. Compared with it, hotel food is bland. Moreover, comics tend to eat irregularly and, from a nutritional standpoint, not too well. Some noted that, because on the road they get up late in the day, they never eat breakfast. Suppers are haphazard, frequently only a snack before the show (as mentioned, few want to perform on a full stomach) and a pizza or something similar in the wee hours of the morning. Some eat well only on Sundays, after receiving payment the previous night for the week's work.

Living accommodations also vary. It is understandable that room managers will try to keep cost down. One way to do this is to arrange for discount rates at a hotel (sometimes a rather seedy one) near the comedy room, where they can put up visiting comics in partial fulfilment of their contract with them. But rates that are advantageous for the manager's balance sheet may spell dirt, poor service, and noise (housekeeping, poolside activity, traffic) for the performer. One solution is for the performer to contract for the cash equivalent of the accommodations and stay with a local comic. Still, this can have drawbacks, too, for the host and guest may not share the same standards of eating, cleanliness, and privacy.

A second solution, more often to management's liking than to the liking of comics, is the "comedy condo." This is a house, townhouse, or apartment owned by the comedy club for the express purpose of lodging visiting performers and lowering operating expenses. Most comics say that, for them, its disadvantages far outweigh its advantages. True, they can save money

by cooking their own meals, but often the food has to be purchased at an all-night convenience store where prices are high. Furthermore these places tend to be noisy with talk, television, and partying (comics' friends in the community may use it as a hangout). Security and cleanliness can be a problem. Betsy Borns (1987, 78–9) reports on the comedy condo in the United States:

... the road is no paradise, according to many comics who look back on their circuit days with anything but fond memories. One of the most frequently mentioned road atrocities is the infamous "comedy condo." These two words have been known to strike almost as much fear into the hearts of stand-ups as the dreaded statement, "You're not funny – get off the stage!" Carol Leifer still travels two weeks out of every month, but now as a headliner, which means, among other things, that her accommodations will not drop below "standard." Today, she says, "I would never do a place with a comedy condo – that's one of the great advantages of getting more successful. If they say we don't give anyone hotels, I say, 'No thanks.' To me, condos are humiliating. I know what people mean when they talk about some club owners' attitudes: 'It's a great write-off for me to buy a condo, rather than have them go to a hotel,' but they're missing the point of why people go to hotels – clean sheets, sanitation ... I once said to someone at a condo, 'When does the maid come?' and they said, 'What maid?' Their attitude was: 'Why should we hire someone to clear the place when it's just you guys?' I'd say fifty percent of the clubs had condos when I was working."

Abby Stein remembers staying in condos "where there were rats ... there had also been two break-ins in one place where there was no security; one comic was robbed of fourteen hundred dollars another of four hundred a few weeks later. Very often this is the situation you have to put up with. Because you're hungry, you want to work, and maybe the same guy who runs that club runs a better club too, and you want to stay on his good side." According to Jerry Diner, clubs in some cities, like Richmond – where so many comics have complained – were forced to provide hotel rooms for comics. He points out that this is an improvement not only in terms of cleanliness, but privacy as well. He remembers, before this, headlining a gig "where the middle act was this big slovenly guy and the opener was a woman – and they were supposed to share a room. I went to bat for the girl and the owner said she knew what she was getting into when she came here. I think he [the owner] wanted her to stay with him, but she refused.

Not all accommodations provided by managers are undesirable. Several comics complimented as clean and roomy the condo owned by Yuk Yuk's in Edmonton. Road warriors playing at Punchlines in Vancouver or at Yuk Yuk's in Calgary and Halifax stay in major hotels with good standards. A number of interviewees mentioned with regret that comics have been known to inflict property damage on condos in reprisal for shabby financial or personal treatment by a room manager.

Automatic Pilot

"Auto pilot" and "automatic pilot" are terms used by comics to describe an average performance. A performer on auto pilot is neither killing nor bombing, but entertaining at an intermediate level of effectiveness. Every comic endures a set like this once in awhile. It is when auto pilot becomes routine that the comic can be said to be in a rut. Professionals by this time in their career are too jaded to have disappointments (see table 2), yet those suffering the "auto pilot syndrome" have forgotten how to generate their most poignant thrill – killing. As one headliner comments: "For the most part doing clubs isn't that gratifying. There is a difference in reaching several hundred people and reaching just a hundred. There seems to be so little at stake. I mean, it's kind of fun. I haven't performed for a few days, so last night was kind of nice. But to be up there night after night is real drudgery. You start thinking I'm at this point in my act and looking at my watch and hoping the show will be over soon."

It is the tendency toward automatic pilot that helps explain the observation of chapter 5 that stage fright is uncommon among veteran road warriors (only present in unusual circumstances). Their concern now is "psyching up," generating enough enthusiasm to perform well. For those who fail to do this, whatever the reason, the dullness of daily existence can become overwhelming. This is when comics turn to their free time for excitement.

Leisure on the Road

Jaded comics often try to offset auto pilot with compensatory leisure routinely available to them because of their work environment: sex, drugs, gambling, alcohol, or some combination of these four (Kando and Summers 1971). With sizeable blocks of

uncommitted time during the day, there is an inclination to spend money on pinball machines, video games, or useless items spotted in shop windows. Many comics, it appears, avail themselves of one or more of these pleasures, but not in the excessive way sometimes claimed in the popular literature on stand-up. Most comics would agree with the advice, even if a few do not follow it themselves, that going onstage high weakens timing and memory, both of which are essential to a good act. According to my observations, all but a handful of comics in Canada restrict use of drugs or liquor to the end of the evening, an after-hours relaxant. A minority use them as antidotes to onstage boredom.

But leisure of this sort can be pursued to excess, at a level that is deviant and unacceptable to society (Stebbins 1988, chapters 5 and 6). In comedy, leisure becomes deviant when the comic gets high on drugs or alcohol several times a week, to the extent that it interferes with writing, rehearsing, and performing and destroys the individual's reputation in entertainment circles as someone in control of his or her behaviour. There is no scientific evidence to support or refute claims (again, found in the popular literature) that comics are more deviant in this way than other entertainers, other people in the same age categories, or other occupational groups.

For some comics, another leisure road-trip activity is casual sex. Male performers in particular have numerous opportunities for it, often performing to audiences with a lot of young women. This brings the risk of AIDS or venereal disease (VD roulette, as it is sometimes referred to), but casual involvement would not otherwise be worth considering as a response to onstage boredom were it not for the fact that most male comics in this study were either married (four) or otherwise committed to one woman (seventeen). Ten male comics (out of twenty-nine male professionals) had lost one or more wives or girlfriends over this issue. Of the twenty-one men with some sort of steady relationship, eight reported that it was not stable. This was attributed to a combination of factors, including suspected infidelity and insufficient contact enforced by the road and night work at home. The remaining fourteen had learned from experience how to handle these problems – by maintaining contact over the telephone, by travelling less, and, for some, by working harder on their acts and thereby escaping boredom. Nine comics in the professional sample, including two of the three women, had chosen to remain unattached up to the time of the interviews because of the problem of developing and maintaining a rela-

tionship during the establishment stage of a career. It is more difficult in their case to establish a connection between onstage boredom and casual sex and compensatory leisure, since they were not expected to confine themselves to one person.

Life at the Comedy Club

A steady diet of comedy clubs forces the road warrior to grapple with a number of special problems. First, personality conflicts. This was the second most prevalent dislike for the professional comics of this study (see table 3). There is a miscellany of disagreeable traits that the comic may see in his colleagues: arrogance, ingratiation, backbiting, chronic complaining, and malicious behaviour. Examples of the latter are the destruction of comedy condos and the mistreatment of amateurs.

Second, there is the problem of relations with amateurs. Most professionals have contact with them before, during, and after shows, but only then. Just seven members of the sample mentioned having amateurs as friends or roommates. Whereas two professionals categorically said they disliked any contact with amateurs, most said such contact was fine, so long as the amateur was a reasonably modest person who showed some promise as a comic and an inclination to accept advice. Giving advice in this situation was defined as a pleasant social exchange, although professionals preferred to avoid commenting on individual lines. Indeed, some would go out of their way to compliment amateurs, a gesture defined by the latter as a thrill (see table 2).

It is the cocky, pushy, praise-seeking, know-it-all that professionals find offensive and whom they occasionally abuse. Professionals have been known to heckle such amateurs from the back of the room or, as emcees, onstage. The amateur in question may be less disagreeable as a person than as a performer. Several times I saw an amateur, let us call him Stan Simpson, who did not fit the mould of the local amateurs. His long hair hung over a black leather jacket and he wore earrings. Several garish rings adorned his fingers, which grasped a pistol (unloaded, so far as I knew) that he used from time to time to scratch his crotch. Other times he brandished it like a club and screamed at the audience to applaud after certain jokes. None of the three times I saw him was the audience impressed. On one of the amateur nights the emcee made several cutting remarks about Simpson and his act. The other amateurs I spoke

with found the act in bad taste, and appeared to ostracise Simpson when he was offstage.

Third is the problem of stealing material. This becomes even more acute in the establishment stage, for now there are tempting audience-tested ideas being presented during the opening and middle acts, which an unscrupulous comic can quickly jot down in the dimly lighted corners of the room. Further, during this stage, material is circulating more widely because the comic travels with it from town to town. Part of the exasperation over theft comes from the fact that some of it, perhaps most of it, is inadvertent. That is, one comic hears a line or joke, and then three months later comes up with an idea that seems original but unconsciously draws on the first comic's material. People who hear many comics and who have a good memory are susceptible to unintentional theft. Superstar Robin Williams was frequently cited in the interviews as an example of someone with this problem. There is a more uncharitable view abroad of Williams and others like him: some think these comics deliberately steal ideas.

Comics who steal concepts rather than lines are sometimes referred to as rewriters. It is even more difficult to prove theft in their case, since a concept is vague and potentially available to anyone. Sometimes a rewriter or line thief will, in a flash of honesty, footnote onstage the source of the material or idea. But this academic gesture is lost on the audience – concerned only with being entertained – and is of little consolation to the aggrieved creator whose concept loses its freshness without him or her having benefited from its delivery.

The Rewards

The burned-out road warrior whose life consists of long stints on auto pilot compensated by drugs, sex, and alcohol seldom lasts long. Something has to give. If the comic is not sidelined for treatment of an addiction, he or she may well be vanquished by competition from other comics who are finding significant rewards in comedy and for whom auto pilot is only a sporadic adjustment. None of the interviewees in this study seemed to be suffering much from artistic stagnation. Every professional, when asked, claimed to be happy with the choice of comedy as an occupation. Its rewards far outweigh its costs, notwithstanding the rigours of the road.

The rewards of a pursuit are those more or less routine values

Table 5
Weighted Selection of Rewards by Rank of Choice

	Rank (total)	
Reward	*Amateur*	*Professional*
Personal enrichment	1 (201)	2 (220)
Self-actualization	4 (160)	3 (213)
Self-expression	3 (178)	4 (200)
Self-image	5 (136)	5 (157)
Enjoyable, fun	2 (191)	1 (222)
Recreate oneself	7 (112)	9 (143)
Social attraction	6 (118)	7 (143)
Group accomplishment	8 (62)	8 (113)
Financial return	9 (42)	6 (150)

that attract and hold its practitioners and are to be distinguished from thrills. Together, rewards and thrills constitute a powerful set of incentives to stick with comedy. Working from a list of nine possible rewards, amateur and professional respondents were asked to select those that applied to them and then to rank their selections from most to least rewarding. The list, one I developed over years of research on amateurs and professionals, was presented to each comic (in English or French) on a file card arranged as follows:

REWARDS OF COMEDY

1. Personal enrichment (cherished experiences, including exceptional audience rapport)
2. Self-actualization (developing skills and abilities)
3. Self-expression (expressing skills and abilities already developed)
4. Self-image (being known to others as a stand-up comic and someone who is humourous)
5. Enjoyable, fun
6. Recreating oneself, regenerating oneself after a day's work
7. Social attraction (associating with other comics, with members of the audience, with show people, etc.)
8. Group accomplishment (group effort in producing a show)
9. Financial return

Every respondent's ranking of rewards was weighted according to the ranking given them. The weights were then summed up

for each reward for each sample. The totals are presented in parentheses in table 5. The rank of each reward, as determined by this procedure, is expressed by the number to the left of the parentheses.

The four top-ranked rewards clustered into groups for both samples, professional and amateur. In the interviews comics tended to consider the first two – personal enrichment and enjoyment – as similar; these rewards can be summarized in the phrase *the gift of laughter.* For all the comics the principal reward was making people laugh – the same enjoyment anyone gets from telling a joke well to appreciative listeners. Almost as rewarding was the *art of comedy,* the self-actualization and -expression made possible by a creative undertaking. Considering these four as primary rewards, we may say that stand-up comedy is attractive work or leisure because it enables the worker to share the fruits of artistic accomplishment with others (the audience) who appreciate what they are receiving. A senior professional explained the rewards of comedy this way: "It is more of a sharing in comedy. To me I find self-expression and personal enrichment almost linked ... It's partly self-expression, letting them know that I've got this funny idea, this good idea. It's altruistic in the sense that there is no concern for yourself. I don't know any comedians who are miserable doing it [comedy], [or who] are altruistic enough to do it just because the audience laughs. I think it's more of a sharing."

It was in reference to primary rewards that comics sometimes defined a performance as disappointing. For example, they expected a particular gig to be highly rewarding and then forgot to present one of their best monologues or inadvertently rearranged the sequence of their monologues into one less effective. As maddening were performances where they were killing but had to leave the stage prematurely because an earlier act went overtime. Hecklers, as we have seen, can also spoil a potentially rewarding night.

The rewards of self-image, social attraction, and financial return clustered for the professionals into a secondary set referred to here as *personal advantages.* There is social and financial recognition that comes with being a professional comic, which is rewarding but not the primary reason for pursuing comedy. Amateurs found more or less the same secondary rewards, except that financial return was for all but a few no reward at all. For both samples, the remaining rewards, although clearly significant (they were ranked), were comparatively minor.

MAINTAINING A CAREER

The turning point that carries a comic into the maintenance stage of a career is finding more or less consistent employment as a comedy club headliner. Although there may still be more travelling than some comics prefer, especially near the beginning of this stage, it normally begins to taper off. The extra free time, as indicated previously, is directed to comedy and related work in and around the comic's home town.

The comic is now a bigshot, paid the most, featured on the club's marquee, advertised in local newspapers, sought after by amateurs, given the best room in the comedy condo (the one with a private bathroom), and sometimes treated with respect by agents and managers. These are the comics who get the encores (made possible, in part, by their position as last in the show). They are also subjected to potshots taken by feisty amateurs, intrepid hecklers, and local entertainment critics, who assume that those on high can take it. The comics in this study who can be classified as somewhere within this career stage – fifteen of the thirty-one professionals – seemed to have acquired the psychological armour to withstand such attacks.

Reaching the maintenance stage does not rule out further advancement. None of the fifteen professional respondents claimed to have achieved all the goals they had set for themselves. These goals fell into three categories. First, some wanted to become internationally famous comics like Jay Leno. Then they could perform at concerts in large auditoriums, famous nightclubs and hotels, and on television – as a comic, not as a soap opera or sitcom actor. They could, if highly successful, have their own television show like Johnny Carson or David Letterman. Second, other comics indicated that their ultimate career goal was to succeed in television or film acting or some combination of the two. These respondents did not always restrict their interest to comedic roles; drama would be fine, too. Third, some comics wanted to write film and television scripts, usually humourous. And several respondents cited as goals two or all three of these. A few talked about writing for or performing in radio and television commercials as a sideline, for some as a way of making ends meet when they were trying to get off the road, for others as a permanent and pleasant diversification of their work.

All respondents said they intended to remain on the stand-up stage in some way. Even if their livelihood came chiefly from

the film and television industry, they would want to play the best headliner spots, perform at concerts, and even travel to do so. But the days of lengthy, mandatory road trips complete with their satellite hell gigs would be over. Live performances would now be an exciting supplement to other work.

A small number of professionals had at one time or another left the road after getting into sketch or improvisational comedy. Involvement here appeared to be more a means to an end than an end in itself. Some comics drew a distinction between the status of stand-up and that of improvisation. The latter tended to be seen by those devoted to stand-up as inferior, little more than a set of training exercises to prepare actors for legitimate theatre. It is no wonder, given this attitude, that few comics hold improvisation as a career goal. The comics' view of live (as opposed to televised) sketch comedy was unknown, it not being seen as a career alternative by most of them. There is very little paid work available in it.

Early in the maintenance or late in the establishment stage, employment in improvisation, commercials, and sketch comedy is appealing not only because it generates income at home but also because it results in greater versatility. Here, as at other times in the career, versatility gives the comic a leg up on the competition for, say, a coveted film or television part. One strategy followed by comics who want to stay off the road is to work in improvisation and the like simply to be in town when more interesting acting opportunities arise. As relative newcomers to the maintenance stage, they can get improvisational roles with little trouble but still must scramble for better acting roles. One professional defined himself at this stage in his career as a comedy whore – one who will take any kind of work to advance.

Life at the maintenance stage is inevitably attended by financial need. The money from performing is a secondary reward to be sure, but it is not to be ignored. Meanwhile, among agents and room managers, financial considerations are typically of primary importance. This brings us to our consideration of stand-up comedy as a business.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Comedy Business

The comic's view of business people in comedy is like the man's view of women expressed by the ancient Greek playwright Aristophanes: "You can't live with them, and you can't live without them." The principal business people with whom the road warrior is in contact are booking agents, personal managers, and room managers or owners. The term *manager* has been used throughout this book to refer to both managers and owners, since they are often the same person. If not, the manager is normally the one responsible for the policies and actions that directly affect the comics he or she employs. Amateurs are involved largely, if not exclusively, with room managers. Professionals well into the maintenance stage of their career also come into contact with, among others, advertising agents, films and television producers, and contractors of special events such as fashion shows, corporate gigs, and private parties.

The comic is dependent on business people, who from a sociological standpoint are classified as *mediators* (Truzzi 1978) between the comic as creator and the audience as consumer. While it is true that in no art are mediators indispensable – that is, the industry could survive without them (Becker 1982, 5–6) – these people do make a difference. For example, without mediators comics would have to promote their own acts, arrange their own appearances, and organize or produce shows in which they have a performance spot. They could do this, but it would greatly cut into the time they use to write lines and shape and reshape them. It would also cut into performance time, which would mean less money and probably require supplementary (nonartistic) employment. In short, business mediators help ensure a full-time livelihood for professional entertainers.

The comics' dependency on mediators in general and booking agents and room managers in particular is clear from the data in this study. Twenty-three out of thirty professional respondents in this study (over 75 percent) relied entirely or largely on booking agents to find work for them. The remainder relied chiefly on referrals from room managers and other comics and on self-promotion, only occasionally taking a job booked through an agent. One respondent never used an agent. Only three employed a personal manager, that is, someone who coached them, possibly wrote lines, and represented the comic with booking agents.

Still, many respondents, *à la* Aristophanes, viewed mediators with mixed feelings. Indeed, the negative side of the business of comedy was among the most hotly addressed subjects in interviews. We start with a look at the comedy business as pursued by mediators and by comics themselves.

THE BUSINESS PEOPLE

Although nearly all remunerated comics are dependent to some extent on booking agents, established performers are generally most dependent. Less experienced professionals in Canada typically rely on one agency to arrange most of their work as live entertainers. In descending order of size (stable of performers), these agencies are, for anglophones, Funny Business Productions (Yuk Yuk's), Punchlines (Vancouver), and The Comedy Nest (Montreal). The Juste pour rire organization has a booking wing that is the largest of its sort for Québécois *comiques*. Both language groups have several room managers and generalized entertainment agents who arrange bookings for small numbers of comics. Some of these are, however, beginning to specialize in comedy, notably Zoé Stotland of Toronto, who has been on the scene since 1981, and more recently Chris Pongrac (himself a comic) and Glenda Fordham, of the same city.

Indeed, there is a tendency in Canadian stand-up for professionals well into the maintenance stage to seek a small agency. The reason for this move will be considered shortly. For the moment let us note that today the French and English Canadian stars of stand-up are, with a few exceptions, represented by small agencies. Often these performers have severed ties with one of the large agencies. They may also have an agent in the United States or one connected with the film or television industries or both.

Agents and Managers

Agents strive to be good business people, to make a profit by maximizing income and minimizing cost. Room managers do the same. With both agents and managers, the drive for success sometimes collides with the comics' drive to develop as performers and make a living.

A good agent tries to ensure that his or her customer (for example, a manager) will live up to the contract between them, which sets out arrangements for wages, meals, lodging, transportation, and performance equipment (microphone, spotlights) for the comic. Depending on what can be negotiated (a comic's seniority often determines this), partial or complete coverage of food, lodging, and transportation costs may be written into the contract. An agent who knows stand-up – and some general entertainment agents do not – will also insist that his or her clients are equipped with an adequate lighting and sound system and performance space. The good agent will go to bat for the comic in the event that a customer defaults on a clause in the contract. In short, this agent tries to serve the performer who pays his or her fee.

Comics appreciate a good agent. Many participants in this study said a good agent was worth the fee. The bad agent by contrast, was roundly criticized in interviews. This person was seen as inefficient or lazy and inclined to neglect the performer's needs. Bad agents may lie, saying that they have tended to a client's concerns when in fact they have not. Some promise junior professionals enough work to prompt the latter to quit their day job, then fail to live up to the promise. Agents are not legally culpable here, since there is no contract drawn up on this matter. Agents consider comics free-lancers who sell their services anew on each occasion of employment.[1]

The agent who fails to promote certain comics is defined as bad by those comics. Some agents have their favourites and promote only them. Several interviewees complained that their agent had tried to persuade a customer interested in them to accept another comic. Younger less experienced comics sometimes conclude that they have scant market value after hearing little from their agent when, in fact, the agent fails to mention them to customers who do not request a particular comic.

In these conditions comics deeply resent an agent's fee: 15 percent for anglophone performers and 30 percent for francophones. The discrepancy in fees of agents representing the two

language groups has, to my knowledge, never been explained. One might speculate that linguistic separation over the years has resulted in the evolution of independent fee structures, and that the smaller entertainment market in French Quebec has forced booking agents there to exact a high fee from performers to make it worthwhile being in the business.

At any rate, bad agents and room managers were the primary source of the number-one dislike of professional stand-up comics (see table 3 under mediator problems). A headliner described some of the problems he had with bad agents: "I dislike the amount of low life out there. It runs the gamut. I mean you work with agents out there that promise you one thing and promise the club owner/manager something else. You're promised a night's work and you get there and they tell you you're going on at nine and will be off at ten. I've had that happen. One time they lined me up with all sorts of work and we were out in New Brunswick, and it was like most of these dates had either just fallen through or were never on. They just told you these things so that you'd think you were getting all this work from the agent."

The bad room manager is cut from the same cloth as the bad agent. To maximize profit he or she bargains hard with the agent or directly with the comic for as low a wage as possible. Unscrupulous agents and managers may even collude in this regard. For example, an agent is better off booking a comic for $800 for two shows than insisting on $1,000 and losing the booking. The agent only loses $30 on the lower wage for the comic, whereas the comic looses $170. after paying a 15 percent commission to the agent.

A number of respondents complained that the bad manager had no respect for comics. Several had been "treated like dirt" by managers who saw comics as service workers to be ordered around like janitors. Bad managers were said to be ignorant of the needs of comics as performing artists, for example, failing to silence or eject unrelenting hecklers. Sometimes, it was claimed, they wanted to commercialize and cheapen comedy by insisting on blue material when the comic could entertain as effectively without it. These are often the managers who offer road warriors accommodations in seamy comedy condos or renege on contractual arrangements. As this respondent complained:

You're always going to hotels you don't know. And the places that

book you, all they ever do is send you to an airport, and you have to figure out where you are from there. You call your contact and they're not in. You're sitting in the airport. I checked into a hotel one time – it was on my flyer, you're staying here. I paid sixty-five dollars for that room. I called them up the next day and they say, "Oh, we haven't been booking comics in there for a long time." I said, "Well, my paper work told me to come here." And she said, "Well, I'm sorry but we don't reimburse that one." So I was out of sixty-five dollars and I was mad. And haven't worked for that lady since ... I won't work for her again.

Except in the Yuk Yuk's rooms, where the job is often done centrally by Funny Business, it is the managers who organize the shows in their establishments. This can be another sore point with comics; some managers care so little or are so uninformed that they create oil-and-water combinations of performers on any given evening. As Comedy Nest owner-manager Ernie Butler put it, "The chemistry must be just right." Specifically, the three or four members of a typical show must complement one another in subject and style of humour. Ideally, they should be able to get along and be willing to work together, for quarrels and animosity can, as noted earlier, find their way onstage by various routes.

Lack of respect is also evident among malevolent managers who try to intimidate comics, threatening to refuse employment in the future unless they consent to perform for little or no pay or to perform in a laugh-off or similar contest. Intimidation is likely to succeed only with junior professionals. One respondent noted:

My favourite thing now is when somebody calls me up to get me to enter a laugh-off and they sometimes tell me they will not book me unless I enter it. I say, "That's fine, I don't need it. I sold a movie. What more do I want?" These people generally say, "Fine, I understand." But with a lot of other comics they really blackball them. They say, "If you don't do this for three weeks for me for free, I won't book you in any of my clubs, because you didn't help me out when I needed help." Well, that's nonsense. These people are pricks for doing that. It's stupid. It's an awful thing to exploit people.

Lack of respect at the managerial level can have long-range consequences. Managers are on the front line, so to speak; they are in a position to judge the quality of a comic's act by the

reaction of the audience. They form opinions of a comic's ability and will indicate to the booking agent whether he or she is welcome back. Apart from possibly lowering the performer's fees, there is little an agent can do to force an unwanted commodity on a room manager; indeed, most of the time there is little inclination on the part of the former to try this.[2]

Thus some managers gain a reputation in performers' circles (generated in the green room and after hours) as capricious, inaccurate, and sometimes malicious judges of talent. They lack not only respect but also understanding and taste. Almost as an antidote, stories of triumph circulate among comics about those in their number who were judged as inept by a manager but who went on to become famous. When managers tried to hire them back, often the comics refused the offer. The score was thereby settled – justice in a painfully unjust world. Joan Rivers's (1986) early career is full of such incidents. Female comics are told more often than males that they will never succeed. Nonetheless, industry-wide stories of triumph rarely feature women.

Agent Rivalry

The language barrier ensures that there will be little or no competition between anglophone and francophone agencies for bookings. Within each community, however, competition is frequently intense. Although scattered around the country, agencies try to book from coast to coast. They must keep their comics employed if they are to retain them exclusively within their stable. To do this in an art where each performer temporarily saturates the local market calls for arranging work in the local markets of other agents.[3] The larger its stable – the more comics to find work for – the more an agency feels competition from other agencies pursuing the same goals in a sphere of limited employment.

Thus it should come as no surprise that interagent rivalry is most intense, at least on the anglophone side, between Funny Business and Punchlines. This is, however, a matter of degree, for no agent, English or French speaking, likes the idea of a performer from another agency contracting a job that he or she, the agent, might have contracted. First, that is one less job for the agent and his or her comics. Second, the commission from that job goes to a competitor and helps that competitor survive another day. Insult is added to injury when a performer trained

and nurtured as an amateur by one agent now competes against that agent.

Agents in Canada try to protect themselves from such competition by discouraging comics from working for other agents in the same business or from booking their own gigs through self-promotion or referrals. Comics intensely dislike this, even if it amounts to little more than an angry outburst by the agent or a threat to forsake those who ignore the directive. Then there is actual forsaking, said by some interviewees to be the ultimate sanction at Punchlines and Funny Business. This measure is most threatening to opening- and middle-act professionals who are heavily dependent on their agents for employment. Well-established headliners can occasionally bargain for the opportunity to work through a rival agency or work on their own, since their agents would lose a major attraction were they to quit them altogether.

The smaller agencies and independent rooms complain that such practices by their larger counterparts leave an insufficient number of comics on the market. This forces agents and room managers to hire foreign entertainers, principally Americans, to provide steady fare to their customers. This situation is exacerbated by the growing public demand for stand-up.

Perhaps none of this would be a problem were agencies able to provide enough work for all comics in their stables at salaries and commissions regarded by all parties as fair and were there enough comics to meet demand. The comics would be happy to remain in the fold, given the security it would provide. Unfortunately, this ideal world does not exist. There seems to be considerable work in today's expanding market for stand-up comedy, but as we have seen some of it lacks appeal. Moreover, work, whatever its appeal, is often unavailable to junior professionals, which helps explain why they are so dependent on agents.

Related to amount of work are the issues of fair salary and fair commission. The latter, in effect, reduces the former. An accurate picture of the gross annual income of stand-up comics in Canada (before commissions are paid) is difficult to come by. Let us consider figures provided by Funny Business for its sixty full- and part-time comics:

None will become rich working Canadian comedy clubs but they can make a comfortable living on the Yuk Yuk's circuit. While an opening act might receive $100 or less for a 20-minute set, according to Funny

Business talent agent Connie Winkelmann, a headliner can pull down $1,500 to $4,000 depending on the venue. A middle-class income of $35,000 a year is typical for a three-night-a-week, 35-week schedule, and top performers can rake in $75,000. For its services, Funny Business earns 15% commission on the value of bookings, which by August, 1986, were running at $900,000 on an annual basis. (Enchin 1986, 97)

Several respondents represented by Funny Business saw these figures as seriously inflated. At the time of the interviews – February to July 1987 – opinion was consistent and strong that *top* anglophone comics in Canada were earning no more than $30,000 annually from Yuk Yuk's. One of the chief reasons for inflating the salary figures, some respondents argued, was to create the public impression that comics were well paid and thereby undermine their campaign for better salaries.

Yet, it is precisely for this reason – salary – that comics in Canada are inclined to seek and take work through another agency or through self-promotion. This may improve salary and provide work when the agency representing a comic cannot. How can a comic survive if over seventeen weeks Yuk Yuk's offers that person no bookings? From those comics who, hoping to solve the problem, find work on their own, many agents still demand a commission:

At that time I was doing about 70 percent of my work on the road and basically it was work that they [agency] could have got me. All it would have taken was a little phone call. To get into Montreal, Ernie Butler had seen me feature in Toronto and he liked me and told the [agency] that I could work for him. But they wouldn't say anything to me, because they didn't want me working anywhere else. So I ended up flying from Boston to Montreal at my own expense and paying my hotel at my own expense to do a twenty-five-minute guest set for free on the chance of getting hired to feature there [at the Comedy Nest in Montreal]. And so I did get hired to feature there and then the [agency] wanted to take a commission off of it. Yet they had done nothing when they could have. All they would have had to do was make a phone call, and I would have been happy to give them a commission. (Senior professional)

It is clear that many comics are caught in the middle as agents strive to maintain and expand their share of the market. This is a consequence of agent rivalry throughout the country, including French Quebec, of which that between Yuk Yuk's and

Punchlines is only the most celebrated. Comics who usually escape this consequence lie at the extremes of the comedy career. We have already mentioned the stars at one extreme. Not yet considered are the amateurs at the other.

Amateurs are commonly paid nothing, particularly when they perform on an open-mike night. Their reward is the opportunity to gain experience and improve. And, under these conditions, there is little pressure from agents for loyalty. As the amateur improves, however, he or she may share with other advanced amateurs a percentage of the "gate" or "door" for performing a regular opening spot or may receive fifteen dollars or so in recognition of this effort.[4] When the amateur is good enough to do regular performances, agent loyalty starts to emerge as a condition for continued representation and sponsorship.

Comics as Business People

Agents and managers are not the only business people in stand-up comedy. Comics themselves are very much in business as well. Like agents and managers they are entrepreneurs, entertainment entrepreneurs. They meet the four criteria of entrepreneurial activity for variety artists that I identified in an earlier study of magicians (Stebbins 1984, 21–2).

First, entrepreneurship requires exceptional *initiative* to develop, promote, and perform an act in the highly competitive world of show business. Collective forms of entertainment, for example, professional hockey, commercial dance music, Broadway musicals, and dinner theatre, deny their practitioners the opportunity for this expression of self-reliance.

Second, *originality* must accompany this initiative if the artist is to succeed as an entertainer. The act must have a novel twist to attract an audience and keep their attention. To be sure, originality is sometimes expected in some of the collective activities just mentioned, but with less frequency than in the variety arts. It is one thing to be asked to play an occasional spirited solo as a member of an orchestra, quite another to do this regularly. If the audience is bored, an employer will refuse to book the comic in the future and the audience will spread the word about the performer's inadequacies. In contrast, the performance of a Broadway singer or actor who is off form on a particular night is hidden, to some extent, in the overall performance of the group. Third, variety artists, as entrepreneurs, also have a considerable measure of *independence* in managing

their affairs once they are under way. Compare their situation with that of performers who must follow the dictates of a coach, conductor, or director.

Last, variety artists assume *risks* to a degree unknown in collective entertainment fields. For example, stand-up comics promoted to opening spots do not sign contracts with an agent that guarantee sufficient work of this sort to justify quitting their day job. The entertainment entrepreneurs do not necessarily invest more time, energy (emotional, physical), and money in their pursuits than others, but they do run a greater risk of failure. Conversely, success is theirs and theirs alone, for they initiate and guide their interests without significant aid or support from others.

But unlike managers and booking agents, stand-up comics are not owners of incorporated businesses. Their entrepreneurial activities are primarily aimed not at maintaining a favourable ratio of income to expenses but rather at making a living while advancing in their profession. For tax purposes most comics would be classified as "sole proprietors" – unincorporated, self-employed citizens who may write off certain relevant expenses incurred in the course of earning taxable income.

Among the matters on which seasoned professionals advise their less experienced colleagues is how to be efficient proprietors. For instance, it is not automatically apparent to many young comics that they should save receipts for unreimbursed meals, lodging, and transportation and deduct them from their annual income. The financially efficient comic learns to economize, say, by eating meals on the airplane rather than buying them just before takeoff or just after landing. The cost of a purchased meal is deductible, but the money recovered in a tax return will be less than the actual cost of the meal.

This advice is useful for comics who report all or a substantial proportion of their earned income to the tax authorities. In proprietorships of all kinds – in science, entertainment, and the arts – the temptations and opportunities are always there to underreport earnings. One maddening consequence of agencies publishing inflated salary figures, as in the example presented earlier, is that it might cause the tax department to conclude there is serious underreporting of earned income in comedy. This could lead, in turn, to an annoying round of audits of individual comics. Underreporting no doubt takes place, but on incomes comics say are significantly lower than those publicized by agencies. A few respondents lamented that some clubs are

beginning to issue tax withholding slips, which will force them to report what they have earned there.

There are other practices followed by the good entertainment entrepreneur. Established professionals point out that comics should keep a record of every engagement, noting the date, salary, location, agent commission, and any reimbursed expenses. They should also note which monologues were used and how they were received by the audience and local reviewers, how the comic was treated by the room manager, and how overall booking was handled by the agent. With many performances in many different places throughout the year, it is easy to forget this information, which is needed when someone defaults on a contract, or several months after a performance, questions its quality.

Indeed, for most established comics the problem is not how to conceal income from government but how to earn enough to make a half-decent living. Taxes on low income are negligible. To tide themselves over until better times, some comics seek loans from banks and other lending institutions. At this point in their career, buying a house is out of the question, but a loan to purchase a car might be needed.

Two conditions make bank loans next to impossible to obtain. One is the irregular income of young professional comics. The other is the public image of comics, which holds that they are happy people who, like some other entertainers, make a great deal of money. The financial statements received by lending institutions from loan applicants quickly debunk the monetary side of this stereotype. But bankers and others in the community see comics in still another light – as good-time Charlies who indulge in sex, drugs, and alcohol and who pursue a marginal nighttime occupation making fun of established ways. This is hardly the sort of person to whom the blue-suited employees of the Canadian banking world are eager to lend money.

Nor, might I add, does this image help the comic crossing the border between Canada and the United States. Here many try to defuse a potentially difficult situation by identifying themselves generically as entertainers. But officials probe. When they discover that the entertainer is in comedy, more often than not they institute a thorough search of all his or her belongings for drugs.

A final consideration in our discussion of comics as business people is unionization. Although there was a comics' strike in the United States in 1979 and an attempted strike by Canadian

performers against Yuk Yuk's in the early 1980s, actual unionization of anglophone comics in North American in has generally met with failure. They say their individuality and independence (as entertainment entrepreneurs) hinders formal organization. Even the American Guild of Variety Artists has had little success in attracting comics in Canada and the United States. Still, comics who work routinely in film and television or who write for these media join the unions associated with them. And, in the United States, the Professional Comedians' Association, which was founded in 1984, numbered four hundred members in 1988. It is possible that comics' attitude toward the use of collective power to reshape their wages and working conditions is changing.

The film and television unions are strong; they control the labour market. Thus comics who wish to work in film and television have little choice but to join them. The same holds for the stand-up comedy industry in French Quebec. After thirty professional performances, francophone *comiques* are eligible to join L'Union des artistes (UDA), which sets and enforces a standard wage scale and provides certain health and pension benefits. Members pay 4.5 percent of their earnings from each performance to UDA in exchange for these and other benefits and services.

THE FUTURE

From interviews and after-hours talk in green rooms it is clear that cynicism and pessimism about the future of stand-up run high in Canada. One senior comic cited comedy's gatekeepers as the main reason:

> People in those positions – talent scouts, room managers, booking agents – are not people with any talent to begin with. And they are in charge of judging who is talented. That's my pet peeve. You're always going to run into that where they don't know. And sometimes when you see somebody making it, it's just such a fluke. It's amazing that anybody gets .·. public attention at all with all the obstacles of these ... people who are interested only in their power and their structure. You know what I mean? And they're so paranoid because, if they have a bad act on their show, then somebody says, "Who hired this guy?" And their jobs could be lost. So they are very scared ... There's a lot of people who just don't know what they are doing ... It's that business part of show business.

It is enough to have to put up with inexperience, hecklers,

low pay, dead audiences, death sets, competition, poor working conditions, and the various temptations and pitfalls of the road. Nevertheless, these problems can all be overcome if a career advances to the point where the comic more or less controls his or her own fate. Senior professionals stand as evidence to amateurs and junior professionals that, if they have talent and stick it out, they can triumph in the end.

What the comic cannot so easily control is the business side of stand-up, the gatekeepers who hold the key to crucial performance opportunities. To be sure, they are not all incompetent and malevolent. But those who are are sufficient in number to make advancement far less certain than even the most risk-taking of entertainment entrepreneurs would like. The comics seem to be saying, "We will put up with the obstacles so long as we have a fighting chance of surmounting them." Indeed, paying dues has long been a critical rite of passage among show business people, a way of proving your commitment to your art by persevering through thick and thin until you reach a comfortable level of success.

And yet, the gatekeeper/business person is here to stay. The events in phase 4 of the history of comedy make that clear. For it was the business people who facilitated stand-up's transition from amateur experimentation (phase 3) to a level of commercialization sufficient to win a place in the highly competitive world of popular entertainment. I have yet to meet a comic who longed for the days of the 1960s and early 1970s, though indeed most present-day comics are not very informed about those days. The comics I talked to, perhaps out of ignorance of other possibilities and notwithstanding the hardships of the road, generally liked today's style of comedy, the means of presenting it, and the way of life associated with it. In short, there is no turning back and apparently little desire to do so.

So what about the future? First, it should be recognized that dues paying is unlikely to disappear. It is endemic to the arts, both elite and popular. A few improvements here and there are perhaps possible, but no great changes for the better can be expected. Success in any of the arts is and will continue to be a struggle.

It is the business part of comedy that shows the most promise for improvement. By promise I mean possibility of improvement rather than probability of improvement. Gatekeepers could be trained in comedy so as to be able to distinguish good and potentially good acts from bad ones. Training might also give

them insight into how comedy is performed and help them develop empathy with those who seriously pursue it. The training could be the same training given to comics themselves, the group lessons and systematic tutelage considered in chapter 5. As indicated, these courses are typically short, for good comedy depends largely on creativity and experience and their application onstage. Trainee-gatekeepers would not have to succeed as performers (although they should perform a few times to learn what it is like); they only would need to understand the principles of good comedy and what comics go through in their drive for success.

This intimate exposure to comedy might help dispel the attitude that comics are unworthy of fair and polite treatment. It will likely do nothing to curb favouritism, which is a human response to other people too basic to engineer with much success. But training could build a resolve among gatekeepers to operate with more efficiency when booking, paying, and housing comics. It could drive home the point that running a comedy room is vastly different from running a bar, with its drinks, television, sex games, and perhaps dancing and weekly darts contests. Stand-up comedy cannot compete with such attractions, which are for opportunistic money-grubbers. That stand-up comedy is commonly presented in drinking establishments (as jazz and chamber music sometimes are) should not lead managers to lose sight of the fact that it is an art, not merely another amusement. This also applies to general entertainment agents, who frequently lack understanding of stand-up comedy and its practitioners. These agents, too, could profit from the training just described.

But there is a problem here: how to encourage gatekeepers to learn more about stand-up. The pressure to learn must come from somewhere. Comics themselves could try their influence but, regarded as lowly, they are unlikely to be persuasive. Possibly the agents, whose speciality is booking stand-up comics, are in the best position to urge room managers to participate in a course or tutor with local amateurs. And the agents gain something from taking the initiative: the fewer the differences between comics and hostile, uninformed managers, the fewer the hours agents will spend trying to iron them out.

In closing, it should be pointed out that there are several understanding, knowledgeable agents and room managers in Canada. Not every gatekeeper in the country needs the training proposed here. A handful are or once were performers. Nor are

comics themselves all saintly. Some misread managerial actions and intentions. Some overestimate their own talent and progress. Some are unrealistic about their own financial worth. Some are lazy and profligate.

The labour market weeds out many poor comics, who eventually find it difficult to get bookings. Poor comics who do get bookings bring out the worst in other comics as well as the agents and managers with whom they will deal. These individuals gain a reputation for being disagreeable so that their mistreatment by the gatekeepers is not defined as discrimination against stand-up comics in general but as justifiable treatment of certain misfits.

The courses and tutelage that I have mentioned are so far available only in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal (in both French and English). How are room managers in other Canadian cities to learn about stand-up? Yuk Yuk's attacks the problem by holding an annual week-long seminar for its managers and manager/owners. Other club managers, unless they travel from time to time to these centres, sit in on training sessions there, and watch amateur nights where the drive for excellence begins, will have to learn from books. I would hope that they could get a good start by reading this one.

Even if no such improvements are made, stand-up comedy and the men and women who perform it are destined to survive and prosper. The public demand is there. Historically, the art has shown remarkable resilience owing, in good part, to the passion of its practitioners. Many comics have had a rough time of it over the years, but that has not discouraged the majority of them from pursuing comedy. If the comedy business remains more or less as it is, performers will still find a way to succeed in it.

All this is not to deny that there are occasions when a sense of injustice is keenly felt by Canada's stand-up comics. Sometimes its venting is enough to blister the paint on the green room walls. There are also times when they glimpse a better – more realistic, more efficient – way of running the business and of getting their art to the public. They wonder why those in control are so short-sighted and speculate on the intellectual and moral fibre of such people. Comics have much insight, trained as they are to see the everyday world in other than conventional terms. At times their intuitive flashes bear on extracomedic concerns, including the ethical and practical side of the entertainment business.

Thanks to certain of these comics and to certain talented agents and room managers, the comedy business will likely outgrow some of its present problems – identifying talent, establishing fair wages, creating proper working conditions, developing a free labour market, and so forth. The art is new and in the process of finding its way. In the meantime there is the reality of an artistic occupation to endure. That reality is the gauntlet of dues paying through which each aspirant must run if he or she is to be successful. That, too, is show biz. In Canadian stand-up comedy, the road to stardom is full of potholes and frost heaves.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guide for Professional Comics

I. Career
   A. Can you recall when you first became interested in stand-up comedy as a fan? *If yes,* please describe the circumstances (age, place, other people, etc.).
   B. How did you continue your initial interest (watch live and televised performances, associate with comedians, give shows, etc.)?
      1) Were any of your friends or relatives in comedy work, theatre, or show business during your early years?
      2) Did anyone encourage you to pursue comedy as an avocation or a vocation?
      3) Did anyone try to discourage your interest in performing comedy?
   C. When was your first public (paid or gratis) performance? Where did it take place? For what function? How old were you? Were you paid?
      1) How did you get it?
      2) Was it a success or a failure? Explain.
   D. Would you say that you have had thrills in comedy (experiences that you defined at the time as exceptionally rewarding)?
   E. Have you had any disappointments in comedy (something more than the routine frustrations)?
   F. When did you become a professional? (You may have answered this question earlier.)
   G. Why did you turn professional at the time you did?
   H. Do you regret choosing comedy as a line of work?
      1) Do you ever get tired of doing comedy?
   I. What are your plans for the future?

II. Professional involvement in comedy
   A. Other involvements
      1) What other comedy-related involvements are there for you (bookings, instruction, writing articles, unions, corporate gigs, etc.)?
   B. Getting bookings
      1) How? Through agents, personal contact, referrals from other comedians (show business people), direct personal promotion?
      2) What proportion of your engagements are out of town?
         (a) In which city do you live?
         (b) For how long are you out of town for a string of engagements?

III. Involvement with amateurs
   A. Since becoming professional, what contacts have you had with amateurs (in clubs, after hours, during the day, as students)?
   B. What is the nature of these contacts? Generally favourable, unfavourable, a mixture of the two?
   C. Do amateurs compete for work with you? With other professionals and perhaps at stags, conventions?
   D. Do you find amateurs to be a critical group? Do they comment critically on the quality of your routines or those of other professionals?
      1) Do you find this criticism valuable?

IV. Family, girlfriend, boyfriend
   A. Does your family (spouse, children, friend) get involved in your comedy work (as assistants, performers, booking agents, test audiences, sources of material)?
   B. What does your family (spouse, each child, friend) think of your involvement in comedy work? Accept; tolerate; reject.
      1) If tolerate or reject, what is it about comedy as an occupation that bothers them (night employment, expenses, travel, inadequate income, etc.)?

V. Orientations
   A. What are the rewards of comedy? (Present the list of rewards. Try first to select those items that are rewarding and second to rank them by their level of importance – 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.).

B. Have you any major dislikes or pet peeves in comedy, as opposed to minor annoyances (e.g., performance circumstances, employers, agents, amateurs, unions, managers, agents, line theft)?
C. Do you get stage fright before your shows? *If yes,* does it remain throughout the show or disappear after the first few minutes?
   1) Do you get especially nervous performing before other comics (amateur, professional)?

VI. Off-work hours
A. What do you routinely do after you finish work for the evening? Does this vary with each city?
   1) Do you have regular places you go to in each city? Are these also used by other people in the entertainment industry? Supply names of these places.
B. What do you do during the day before shows?
C. Do you stay at the same hotels each time you go to a particular city?

VII. Miscellaneous
A. What are your major hobbies and avocational activities?
B. Age
C. Education

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Notes

CHAPTER ONE

1 Experienced improv players recognize that even subjects spontaneously suggested by the audience become routine. Eventually they enact a standardized (no longer improvised) response to suggestions.

2 Chung Ling Soo (1861–1918) used to present two hours of magic without uttering a word. He was, however, quite capable of speaking English. He was born Billy Robinson, a Caucasian (Oursler 1978, 59).

3 This statement is much less valid for the stand-up comedy presented at business and professional conventions and over television. It is, however, valid for recorded comedy, be it video or audio.

4 In fact, Twain was not the only lecturer during the 1850s and 1860s to use humour on the circuit. But seriousness was the rule among public speakers in those days, with polite humour permissible only as a respite from solemnity. Twain and a few others pioneered changes in this tradition (Fatout, 1960, 101–2). And he appears to have been in the vanguard in delivering predominantly humourous monologues through the medium of his own personality rather than an enacted personage (as David Ross Locke did as Petroleum V. Nasby, a fictional, illiterate, cowardly, lying scoundrel of a preacher).

5 The term *vaudeville* is an anglicization of the name of an area in France, *Vau-de-Vire,* where some of the satirical songs of the *chansonniers* were composed.

6 This requirement also makes Charlie Case a more typical stand-up comic than either Twain or Rogers.

7 Remember that even The Improv was intended as a hangout for theatre people, not as a stage for comics to work out on.
8 By the foregoing I do not mean to reject the hypothesis put forward by psychologists that humour, including that of stand-up comedy, releases tension (Raskin, 1985).

CHAPTER TWO

1 Summarized from interviews with Paul Mandell and Larry Horowitz.
2 One could also measure the business volume of these agencies by the number of *special* bookings: emcee jobs, corporate hospitality suites, after-dinner speeches, men's and women's gatherings, college and university concerts, and the like. Yet conversations among comics about the size of an enterprise never include such bookings, perhaps because they are so widely scattered when compared with bookings and admissions into affiliated and satellite rooms.
3 Some of these are on the order of the humourous deceptions presented in the American television program "Candid Camera" and on Radio-Canada's "Insolences d'une caméra" and "Surprise-surprise."
4 For instance, the newly opened Yuk Yuk's in Niagara offers a twenty-minute video before each show. Its manager, Donny Coy, is also considering a similar feature in his Hamilton Room.
5 This orientation is now, however, becoming more national, as the Elwoods are hoping to compete against Yuk Yuk's with clubs of their own in Calgary (opened in mid-1988), Edmonton (opened November 1988), Hamilton, and Toronto.
6 The term *Québécois* is used here to refer to francophone inhabitants of Quebec.

CHAPTER THREE

1 See the discussion of this problem in chapter 2 with reference to Montreal's Comedy Nest.
2 This distinction between comedian and comic does not refer to the transformation in personality some comics claim for themselves when they step onstage. A comic will say he or she is a "different person" onstage. Offstage the comic may be timid, gruff, sarcastic — not the likeable, confident character that appears onstage.
3 Eddie Murphy's humour in *Raw* is frequently of the angry control-and-conflict type. So was that of television sitcom star Archie

Bunker. But Bunker's orientation was different. He, like Vaudry, was an actor playing the role of an angry person, not expressing personal convictions as Murphy appears to be doing in his film. Control-and-conflict humour, the stock-in-trade of the new-wave comics of the 1960s, usually contains a profound message of some sort. As least one writer laments the absence of this style among modern comics (see Walcott 1974).

4 One theory of humour centres on the proposition that humour emerges from incongruities (Raskin 1985, 39).

5 Horowitz goes on to point out that new material can also be generated onstage as the comic responds spontaneously to blurted commentary and heckling from the audience.

6 Some respondents admitted to the problem of having a delivery too rapid for easy comprehension. Further, rapid delivery and high energy are not indispensable. There are successful comics whose delivery is rather slow and lazy.

CHAPTER FOUR

1 This is a substantial modification of Supers's (1957) classification of career stages. Neither his taxonomy nor that of Miller and Form (1980) the two most cited schemes in the literature, fit the work histories of most entertainment entrepreneurs (Stebbins 1984, 21–8).

2 See, for example, articles on Milton Berle and Eddie Cantor in Franklin (1979). On the decline of Will Jordan, see Berger (1985, 307–18).

3 Most respondents in the overall sample grew up in a metropolitan area. I selected 1981 as the date for comparison because many respondents were adolescents at that time.

4 Comics themselves sometimes comment that they and their colleagues are "crazy," that they have to be to go onstage and risk failure before a roomful of strangers. One veteran holds that between 30 and 40 percent of Canadian comics are slightly psychotic and all are neurotic.

5 Betsy Borns (1987, 105–16) found a similar mixture of parental support, neutrality, and nonsupport in her sample of famous professional stand-up comics in the United States.

CHAPTER FIVE

1 Mangers of Canadian comedy clubs vary in their qualifications to offer such advice. Only a handful have performed as comics.

Some of the others have developed a partial understanding of comedy from watching audience reactions and talking with individual performers about their acts. These managers frequently participate in green room and after-hours conversation.

2 As comic David Merry observed in an interview, every stock line is created by someone. Subsequently, it is stolen so many times that its users lose track of the creator and it is now in the public domain.

3 Other establishments where comedy is sometimes offered, such as bars, nightclubs, theatres, and convention halls serve many different purposes. Only the comedy club is strictly for comedy.

4 A sympathetic emcee may allow an amateur who is performing well to remain onstage two or three minutes longer.

5 When the comedy club is located in a hotel, comics may stay in their room until just before their time onstage. Some return to their room immediately following the act.

6 Junior comics, both amateur and professional, sometimes intentionally use crossover material to test the adaptability of the senior professional who follows or to cut a professional down to size by forcing him or her into a difficult performance situation.

CHAPTER SIX

1 The present statement of this ideal type is a revised and expanded version of the original published in Stebbins (1979b, 24). Subsequent research projects, including the present one, have made the revisions and expansions possible.

2 One partial solution to this problem is for the comic to return in another capacity, say as emcee.

3 Occasional passing reference was made in interviews and casual conversations to street comedy as a way of gaining experience and pocket money simultaneously. Performing on a busy street, however, poses some extreme and unrealistic challenges for the verbal entertainer. One has to do with timing. Reverberations off walls, says Ernie Butler, help the comic determine the precise moment at which to speak next. Reverberations are very different, often nonexistent, outside. This principle was not ignored, by the way, in the street comedy presented for the first time during the 1988 festival Juste pour rire. The comedy seen at that time on St Denis Street consisted largely of mime and stunt acts with little spoken material.

4 Remember that Yuk Yuk's and Punchlines have different official

approaches to this question, with the former condoning blue humour and the latter actively discouraging it.

5 The remaining four respondents had little or no contact with amateurs. They seldom worked in comedy clubs.

6 Two junior professionals who had just entered the establishment stage were still not travelling much. They were excluded from the twenty-seven in the analysis. There were no data for the other two respondents.

CHAPTER SEVEN

1 Mark Breslin says (personal communication, May 1989) that Yuk Yuk's is moving away from the standard agent/performer relationship toward that of employer/employee. Because Yuk Yuk's owns so many clubs, it is becoming possible to guarantee a certain annual income and provide a health-benefits package. Comics who accept these arrangements are expected to work exclusively for Yuk Yuk's. Ultimately Breslin hopes to transform his enterprise into a comedy studio that offers contracts for performing, writing, and other creative projects.

2 Funny Business is an exception to this observation. The co-owner/managers of Yuk Yuk's clubs are obligated to book every comic the agency represents at least once a year. Thus a comic who routinely performs poorly in a certain club can still wind up playing there, whether the manager likes it or not.

3 Comics, having once performed in a regular or emcee spot in a given community, are considered to have temporarily lost their audience appeal.

4 Before the comics' strike in the United States, the door was the main way most people got paid for performing stand-up comedy (e.g., Borns 1987, 33).

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