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Comedy course
By Steve Bustin

“Don’t worry, I don’t expect you to be funny today” says Jill, our comedy coach.

25 pairs of shoulders relax as we stop sweating over trying to think of something even vaguely witty to say to impress our course-mates.

The group gathered on a Saturday afternoon in a central Brighton, neon-lit basement comedy club that still reeks of last night’s cigarettes, are an eclectic bunch, including nurses, social workers, consultants, parents, students and me. We’re all here to learn about being a stand-up comic, or at least the rudiments of being funny. Now, I’ve never harboured a burning desire to be a comedian, and the idea of dealing with hecklers fills me with dread, but I wanted a new challenge, so here I am, starting to harbour serious doubts about my sanity.

As the obligatory ice-breaking games reduce the shyness, the characters start to emerge. While some are clowns, natural show-offs and wanna-be performers, others are quieter, more reflective, and more interested in writing than performing. Those that have already performed a few gigs are treated with awe and respect, as they’ve lived to tell the tale and seem to want to do more. All of us profess a love of comedy, but few claim to understand the mechanics of being funny. It seems Jill Edwards has the answers.

Jill has been running her comedy workshop for 13 years, after a successful career as one half of double act Pep Talk. The course, which runs over 12 weeks, covers everything from opening and closing your act, writing the gags that will (hopefully) come in between, and starting out on the rocky road to comedy god status. Jill’s successes suggest she knows what she’s talking about, as she helped such greats as Jimmy Carr, Shazia Mirza, Hal Cruttenden and Francesca Martinez get started in their careers.

That role-call seems incredibly intimidating as we start the course, but we soon discover that we do indeed, as Jill promises, have an ‘inner comic’.

Each week, we discover a little more about what it takes to stand on a stage and make a room full of people laugh. Want to know what is likely to make someone laugh? Think about what makes you laugh. The mantra becomes ‘write about what you know’ and we all start delving into our psyches and our lives, for potential comedy material.

There are several different methods you can use to write comedy, we learn, from committing your deepest thoughts into a Dictaphone, to drawing grids of key words or even just sitting looking at a blank piece of paper, waiting for those punch lines to flow forth.

Despite all using the same methods, it’s amazing how different our material becomes. Some become incredibly personal and even revelatory, while others are observational, some physical and some remarkably deadpan, as everyone discovers their own comedy ‘voice’.

Each week sees us learning about a new part of the comedic art. From microphone technique (don’t trip over the wire or take out the eye of someone in the front row as you move the mic stand) to coping with ‘dying’ on stage, when nobody laughs (which basically means trying to get off while maintaining some modicum of dignity) and the old perennial of dealing with hecklers (always remember: you’re sober, you’re the centre of attention and you’ve got the mic. The heckler hasn’t, so you’re in control) we build our armoury of skills as we construct our weaponry of killer gags.

I joined the course thinking that one Julian Clary or Graham Norton is probably more than enough for this world, and

that I didn't want to pigeon-hole myself as a gay comedian. My 'inner comic' however, seems to have other ideas. Every time I sit down and write, I find my gay view of the world coming to the fore, taking side-swipes at straight lads, fag hags and the hetero idea of the 'twilight world of the homosexual'. Even when I'm writing about completely unrelated topics, from my own voice to the local health-food shop, my sexuality is out there for all to see.

When I get up onto the stage, it seems to take hold completely. All of a sudden, I'm told, I go from being (I like to think, anyway), relatively reserved, to a gurning, arm flapping camp-meister, snorting and sneering my way through my material. I worry about whether I should tone it down, but quite frankly, it's getting laughs, so if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

When I tell friends about the course, however, I get two distinct reactions. Most just say 'you must be mad' and tell me that they couldn't think of anything worse than doing stand-up. Among gay friends, the first comment I seem to get is 'so when are you dragging up, then?' Why does gay comedy have to involve drag? I've got no desire to don a glittery gown, a wig and terrifyingly high heels, and even if I did, I'm not sure I'm fierce enough to pull it all off. And besides, sequins really don't suit me (much).

Finally, it is time to face a real live audience for the first time, at a new act night at Komedia, one of the UK's premiere comedy clubs. People keep asking if I'm nervous. Er – yes. Shitting bricks, actually. Standing in front of an audience who expect you to make them laugh IS terrifying, but once you get that all-important first laugh, curiously satisfying, and even, I can already see, addictive.

My three minute act, the result of several weeks of writing, re-writing and rehearsal, is about 'going straight', which basically allows me to poke fun at the weirdness that is the heterosexual male, and laugh at some of their assumptions about gay men. Funnily enough, some of the straight lads in the audience seem to find it slightly hard to take, and sit there stoney faced, poor loves. The gay men and the women seem to find it hysterical, however, and laugh like drains in all the right places, bless, 'em.

Would I do it again? Put it this way, I've accepted two bookings for January already. Am I any good at it? Only time, audiences and the gods of comedy will tell....