

'Teaching Stand Up Comedy Is The Thing I'm Supposed To Do': Interview With Jill Edwards



Jill Edwards is a stand up comedy teacher and promoter, running Comic Boom a monthly comedy club at the Komedia Brighton, alongside her comedy courses. We spoke to her about her career, the Brighton Scene, and teaching stand up.

Jill has spent her entire adult life in the comedy world as both a performer and trainer, moving her well-established comedy courses to the [Komedia](#) in 2005. Her courses are aimed at those considering careers in comedy as well as those who just want to try it out for fun. Some of her comedy course graduates have gone on to enormous success, including Romesh Raganathan, Shappi Khorsandi, Seann Walsh and Jimmy Carr.

"I genuinely think that teaching stand up comedy is the thing I'm supposed to do," she says, "I can't imagine life without the sheer joy of watching somebody who's never done anything funny suddenly doing something hilarious. I try and make a connection with everybody that comes through my door because teaching, for me, is about that connection and helping them find their voice in comedy. I start off working with people from scratch who maybe don't even want to be comedians, but the job goes all the way through to when they're ringing me from backstage at some TV show saying: 'I'm not sure I can do this!'"



Jill enjoys a student's performance at Brighton Komedia

Jill says a course isn't essential to become a successful comic: "You can just go out there and work it out by trial and error. What I think, and what my graduates seem to say about my course, is that what I can do is save you years of mistakes. I've been in comedy the whole of my adult life so I have seen a lot and I have learnt a lot in the process. I train people from scratch and I aim to teach them how to write great material. Anyone can write jokes but writing great jokes, ones that were worth writing in the first place – that takes great skill. How to hold a microphone, how to deal with heckling, how to handle dying and all of the performance skills, tips, and tricks – there's loads of straightforward bits and pieces I can teach people that just mean when they start, they start from the best place possible in order to develop and grow."

For Jill, one of the keys to writing good stand up material is concision: "A lot of people do think that stand up is going on stage and rambling until you hit funny bits, but there is actually a very specific format to jokes: jokes have a set-up and a punchline. When you are watching a comedian, every bit you laugh at was a punchline and the bit that came before it was the set-up. If there is a massive gap between the laughs then the set-ups are too long. If those gaps are regular-ish then the setups are the right kind of length. I work privately with comedians at all levels, and often when I watch a new act's clip, they're just standing on stage rambling. That's not actually stand up. The job of the stand up comic is to tell jokes but to make it look as if they are not telling jokes – that's what makes it so difficult. It's a real dividing line between new acts and top comics."



Comedy course graduate and star of BBC's Asian Provocateur Romesh Ranganathan
(Copyright Andy Hollingworth)

We asked Jill sets her most successful graduates apart from the rest: “I’m still in touch with all my graduates who have done very well. I am so lucky that they are such a lovely, loyal bunch. The quality they all share is that they all worked incredibly hard and were under no illusions that it was going to be amazingly hard work. They understood how to listen and listened to the right people. They were all a joy to work with, easy to work with and very professional, which is very important. They didn’t get defensive about feedback: they listened to feedback and went “right, OK!”, and thought about how they were going to change and how they were going to improve. If you want people to pay you money then you have to do something that is worth paying money for, so you’ve got to actually remember that it is a job. Professionalism is very important: you turn up on time, you don’t turn up drunk, and you are very polite to promoters. You behave professionally as if you were going to a bank job. If you were a bank manager then you wouldn’t turn up drunk, would you?”

“In actual fact the time when my graduates need more help and more feedback is if they are starting to get famous. If someone wins a competition and starts to stand out a lot of agents will be after them . TV will be offering them stuff that they can and can’t do. The pressure is really on them and they are under the spotlight. They actually haven’t got that long in which to make the right decisions. They’ve got about a year and they could easily blow it by just making the wrong decisions. This is the time that I will be on the phone more with a graduate than any other. Because that s***s real. That’s really real.”

Jill says she’s never been surprised by the success of any of her comedy course graduates but, “I sometimes have a graduate who hasn’t quite broken through yet but I really believe should. If I do notice that happening I might try and connect them up with people that can help. I can take people to a certain point and what I usually do then is to try and connect them up with an agent that might help or another graduate who is already touring or on TV who might like them and be able to offer them something.”



Jills advice: "Don't start until you're ready", (Copyright Andy Hollingworth)

New comedians often ask how they can banish nerves but Jill says they never really go away: "I think that what happens is that comedians learn to live with nerves. I notice that quite often with great nerves comes great talent so I wouldn't say that anyone who gets insanely nervous isn't going to become a top comedian. It could actually mean the opposite, as long as they are good as well. The pressure of being a top comedian is just absolutely insane and I think that what happens is the best ones, the ones who break through and stay there, have to really draw on their stability and learn to cope with their own nerves and insecurities. It's just all very intensified because they are in the public spotlight. It's hard."

She does, however, have some tips for those who have a problem with nerves: "Don't start until you're ready. Actually get a proper, decent set together that you're sure is going to work and then go and **do** it. It's not bungee jumping – if you fling yourself in unprepared and just get up at a night when you're a bit pissed it will be crap and then you will be right to be nervous. A warm-up routine is absolutely essential and there's a whole load of things you can do. If you get tension in your shoulders then in your warmup routine you do something that relieves the tension in your shoulders. If you speak too quickly – a lot of people do – then you need to do a breathing warmup. You watch these top comics on TV and think they're amazing and must never get nervous but of course they do, they have just worked out a way of dealing with it, which I think is quite hopeful if you are a new act."

Since launching her stand-up courses and new comedy night Comic Boom Jill has seen the comedy scene in Brighton explode: “There was [Krater](#) on a Saturday Night, a little new act night called [Rabbits in the Headlights](#) and that was pretty much it. There was nothing here except for the wonderful Komedia which was at that time in a much smaller venue. There was a little gang of us all saying there's nothing in Brighton comedy-wise, let's do something about it. We all had different skills which we pooled together. Gradually new act nights sprung up more and more, and in the same year my comedy courses began the [Brighton Festival Fringe](#) and the [Brighton Comedy Festival](#) started.”



Comic Boom takes place at Komedia Brighton on the last Thursday of the month

Comic Boom started to fill what she saw as a gap in the market: “There are lots of places for new comedians to play – when they are brand new – and then there is this massive gap before they are trying to get into the really big clubs. If you're going to a little local new act night one of the exciting things about that is that there are going to be some people who aren't that great yet or some people who have got potential or are amazing or people who are doing something badly weird. With a top comedy club – and in Brighton the top comedy club would be Krater – those people have been going for a long time and will have a great solid twenty that will keep any kind of audience happy. So there is a massive difference between those two clubs. Comic Boom started in 2006 a year after I started running my comedy courses here at the Komedia. That's what Boom was really intended for – to provide a middle ground between the little new act nights and the great big comedy clubs; but only for the most exciting and original newer acts. The intention was to give acts with genuine potential the opportunity to learn how to play a really big room, to learn the differences because they are massive, and to give them the chance to work their way up the ranks at Comic boom and become headliners and MC's and to move onto bigger clubs and TV and stuff like that. They have which is really exciting, so it worked.

“There are some great local comedy clubs. Obviously, Krater is your big mothership main night, and Bent Double at the Komedia is excellent as well. There are some great original little comedy nights in Brighton. There's a lovely little night called [Titter](#) which is storytelling and stand up. Titter is fun because it allows stand-ups to do a different thing – tell a story. There's also [On The Edge](#) at the Caroline of Brunswick which is a new Friday night club with very good bills.

And a mad little night called [Comedy Cuts](#) at the [Artista](#), which is literally like sitting in a living room and watching brand new comedians trying something out. There's another new night just opening up at the [Dukebox](#) called [GOAT Island](#), run by a group of exciting local comedians. They've added off the wall characters and game show madness to the comedy mix."

"One of the things that I think is important for the Brighton Scene is that people don't start up the same kind of comedy nights all the time. It's something that needs to be taken care of – our comedy circuit. I think it's important for everyone to come up with an original idea, set up a night that's original and a little bit different and then everyone's offering something new. A lot of the people running the established nights are my students and graduates so if they ever get stuck they have someone to ask and I will always help them. One of the reasons why the Brighton comedy circuit is good is because the best promoters know each other and work together to keep it great.

"The key for me with all of it is originality. Be original in your ideas, with your material, with your club, with whatever you are planning to do in the stand-up comedy world."

For more information on Jill Edwards Comedy Workshops and Comic Boom comedy club at Komedia Brighton check out www.jill-edwards.co.uk