

BE A “COMEDIC CHARACTER” FOR STAND-UP COMEDY

Getting Into Your Own Act

By Steve North, the Comedy Coach

We all have a “comedic character.” It’s different on everybody, just like we all have different faces and bodies. But the comedic character is what separates a comedian from a comic. Or, in other words, a funny person who’s in their own act from a joke-teller.

How do you get into your own act? By doing the very thing we have been running away from ever since we began moving out of our childhood: Getting real about your funny flaws and blowing them up to the point of absurdity (in front of an audience no less!)

That is the great irony of comedy (and, it seems, most things in life): The very thing that scares us most is the very thing we need to overcome to be successful.

Let’s face it, it feels safer to make fun of something else than to hold ourselves up to be laughed at. Well, guess what? That’s what a good comedian does. They find their flaws, blow them up and “live” there on stage.

When coaching comedians, I find the biggest challenge is to get people to find their own “comedy house” before shopping for all the furniture (material). People resist it. We all resist it. It’s a lot safer to make fun of other people or things rather than yourself.

For most of us, we learn to avoid the pain of growing up by covering up our qualities that make us different, unique, crazy, wild and “dysfunctional” (all the elements of a good comedian). In order to get jobs, impress parents, earn grades from teachers, gain favor with associates, we all learn to present a socially acceptable façade. I call this our “public relations” version or the “protected” you. It is the masks we use to function in society, to convince strangers we are “normal, intelligent, trustworthy and stable.” But it is the exact that that will kill your comedy.

Comedy, however, demands we expose the “unprotected you.” Let’s face it, we laugh at drunks, children, and animals because they’re unpredictable and wild which makes them funny and entertaining. As kids we were our unique “unprotected” selves. Some of us were bossy. Some of us were shy. Some were overly active, sad, or happy. Who were you? Were you the thrill-seeker, running up and down the slid and jumping off the monkey bars? Were you the kid that tried to intimidate other kids into doing what you say? Did you make up wild lies to get attention? Did you cry to get your way?

Those behaviors are all okay when you’re a kid because we know kids: They pee their pants and get dirty, and fight and cry; and that’s what kids do.

As we grow up, our teachers, friends, family, and parents all shape us away from those “wild” behaviors so we could be more like everybody else, fit in, be a team player, etc. This may be a good thing for society (or the human race would have blown itself up by now), but our unprotected state, with its passion, crazy, raw,

unique voice, still lies beneath our “public relations” persona and is essential to any creative person’s craft.

Now in comedy, who would you most likely pay down ten dollars to see - somebody who says, “Excuse me, but can you tell me where the public facilities are?” or someone who says, “Hey, I gotta pee, where’s the can?” You probably picked the second guy.

In acting, it’s a well know tenet of casting directors and producers that the “safe audition” is the most dangerous of all - dangerous in the sense that you’ll never get the part. In comedy, the safe delivery, the safe act, the technically correct observational comic way of presenting comedy is, in fact, the most dangerous of all because you simply become interchangeable with the next performer, and the next performer ...

Or you’re thinking, “Wait a minute, you mean in order to be good at comedy, I have to essentially be a lunatic, a maniac, a psychopath or a neurotic? Well, the answer is... “yes and no.” Yes, you have to go to the extreme on stage; No you don’t have to be that way in real life.

I coach a lot of comedians who’ve been on the road for ten and fifteen years, who are now trying to get their material personalized and about them and into their unique comedic focus. It’s a huge amount of work, and a torturous process, but it’s worth it.

Believe me, it’s waaaaaay better to do it from the beginning. Find your house before you buy the furniture.