

Fall 12-2017

BOOMING LAUGHTER: The New Era of Experimental Comedy Shows

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Recommended Citation

Gonzalez, Oscar F., "BOOMING LAUGHTER: The New Era of Experimental Comedy Shows" (2017). *CUNY Academic Works*.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds/307

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It's 9:30 p.m. on a Sunday, and Calvin Cato is about to go on stage in the basement of People's Improv Theater in the lowest East Side, known simply as The Pit, in front of a crowd of eight people. Earlier in the day, he performed at a Bay Ridge United Methodist Church in Brooklyn for 40 people. His material is clean enough, and funny enough, to work on a church audience with people of all ages or an audience of inebriated 20-somethings.

He had asked to go on early in the rotation of comics to save some time for the trip from the Lower East Side back to his place in Brooklyn. He'll go third in the group of five comics who will do 10 minutes of stand up comedy before the headliner takes the stage. Cato decides to stick around after his set to offer a bit of support to his fellow comics, leaving after the headliner Mike Recine takes the stage.

As he's leaving, one of the producers of the show takes Cato aside to let him know that he isn't going to get paid because of how few people there were in the audience. Like the church show, Cato took the job thinking it was a paid gig. Two shows in one day, both with no pay.

"I wish I got paid, but that's how it is," said Cato, 34, who has been doing stand-up comedy for 11 years. His day job is a development editor with LearningMate, a company that creates learning materials for schools and corporations.

Cato is like a lot of other young comedians in New York who are chasing a dream of quitting their day job and be a professional comic. Although he gets paid for some gigs here and there, there are days like this one where he will perform multiple times with no compensation.

He is part of a generation of comedians who are riding a comedy wave. Comedy is booming, and there are more ways for comics to get on stage. There are more venues to perform comedy at, but there are a variety of experimental shows that test the writing, performance and courage of the comedians. These shows let young comedians like Cato hone their craft and perform in front of larger audiences than previous generations.

Stand-up comedy is a big business in New York City, which is the home to more stand-up shows than any other city in the world. And business is good.

Comedy is in the middle of its second boom. The first was in the late 70s and throughout the 80s, a time when there were approximately 300 comedy clubs across the country according to Richard Zoglin, the author of *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America*. In comparison, a [2018 report from market research firm IBISWorld](#) says there are more than 900 comedy venues, and in New York City, Greenwich Village is the heart of the city's comedy scene, at it was back then.

Legends such as George Carlin and Richard Pryor made a name for themselves in clubs that are now long gone such as The Bitter End, The Duplex and The Gaslight Club. Today, superstar comics such as Amy Schumer, Aziz Ansari and Kevin Hart perform at the Comedy Cellar while less experienced comics will perform at The Lantern.

Most comedy shows will feature a comedian going on stage for a certain amount of time to tell jokes to a crowd, but other shows flip the script on comedians to both challenge them--and give the audience something fresh.

One of the most well known shows tests a comic's skills on writing the most foul, offensive joke possible. In a time when a joke sent via Twitter can cause people to lose their jobs, there are few places that go above and beyond to verbally thrash another person without any consequences.

Let's Roast

A Roast Battle has a simple premise. Two comedians tell five jokes that insult the other. A panel of judges decides who was the best. The result is a show where bringing up someone's dead sister can make the crowd roar in laughter. This was the case in October 2017 when comedians Dina Hashem and Rosebud Baker battled each other.

"Rosebud, you weigh 50 pounds soaking wet which is how you found your little sister's corpse when she drowned in your Jacuzzi," Hashem said to Rosebud in front of an audience at The Stand NYC Comedy Club.

"I went home that night and I was just sitting there and saying 'wow, that hurt a little bit,'" Baker said. "But only after the fact. In the moment I was like 'well, she called me thin.'"

The idea for Roast Battles was born four years ago at the famous Comedy Store in LA. Two comics got into an argument one night about whether or not one of them was underage. Emotions flew, insults were thrown...and the show's host--comedian Brian Moses --came up with an idea – one that just might keep the comics from punching each other out -- and give the audience a laugh.

"I suggested they write some jokes about each other and everyone in the room would be like Roman kings and queens and yay or nay them," Moses said on an episode of the "Grand Theft Audio" comedy podcast three years ago.

Roasting itself has a long tradition in comedy. What started off as playful ribbing between performers during the 50s and 60s became a tradition at the famous Friar's Club in New York. It was Dean Martin who then made them mainstream with the "Dean Martin Roasts" in the 70s, and then brought back in the 90s by TV network Comedy Central. These events were intended for major celebrities, but this new version of a roast allow for young comedians to partake in the tradition.

The producer and host of the New York show is comedian and podcaster Luis J. Gomez. Over the course of four years, he's seen comics with only a couple years of experience make the walls shake with laughter from a packed crowd. He says the show gives new comedians a chance to perform in front of a large crowd and can act as a gateway for TV appearances. Most importantly, he views Roast Battles as a necessity during the current climate of political correctness.

"This is the only show where comedians can the absolute worst and offensive material without getting in trouble," Gomez said. "This is what audiences want and Roast Battles is the only show that can provide it."

Why Roast When You Can Boast?

If jokes about suicide, racism, and other similar subject matter come off a bit too strong, then there is another option. A show where the goal is for one comedian is to shower their opponent with an atrocious amount of compliments.

There is an alternative for Roast Battles called Boast Rattles. Created by comedian Kyle Ayers, 29, the show's concept is for two comedians to use jokes to say how great the other one is. At one show, Adam Conover from TruTV's "Adam Ruins Everything" participated and spoke highly of his opposition, comedy writer Mike Metzger.

"I'm not lying when I say Mike Metzger is a great comic," Conover said. "Every time he goes on stage, the room empties...I mean the green room because all the comedians go into the audience and watch his set because his joke writing is so good and they might learn something."

Ayers thought the idea of praising another comedian rather than insulting them could be a challenge. The result was not only a funny show, but also kudos from other comics.

"I've had a big outpouring of comedians who enjoy the inherent positivity behind the show," Ayers said. "There's certainly a ton of negativity in the world right now, and the show offers a really fun time."

Mike Suarez, 39, is an Uber driver and Brooklyn resident that was in the audience to see Conover perform, as he's a fan of the TV show. He was surprised that a show about compliments was so funny.

"I didn't know what to expect," he said. "You almost can't help but laugh at how they boast about each other."

Although it's an alternative to the Roast Battles, Ayers still loves to hear roast jokes. He's happy that his show gives both comedian and audiences a different perspective on how to craft a joke.

"I think roasting comes from a place of love, which is beautiful," he said. "I think boasting is the same, and brings the audience in on that love, all while letting people see jokes in a new way."

The Comedy of Nudity

What's considered a nightmare for most people is the hook for a comedy show in the city that even the most veteran comedians are afraid to do. The Naked Show has comedians perform in front of a crowd baring it all.

Alison Klemp, 31, is originally from Denver, Colo. and the producer of the show. She's the one who has to convince how much of a great experience it is to perform in front of an audience without any clothes on. She remembers vividly her first time on naked on stage because she was so hungry at the time.

"You know I'm still human and vain, and I wanted to present my best self so I worked out a lot and did not eat much," Klemp said.

She rewarded herself with a burrito that she brought on stage with her. To finish her performance, she began devouring it with a big smile on her face.

Andy Oifesh, 50, is comic from Boston, Mass. who came up with the idea of The Naked Show back in 2008. He wanted to produce a show of his own and decided what better way to face your fears than performing in front of a crowd in the nude. What he didn't expect was the effect it would have on him and other performers.

"Every comedian, including myself, comes with a newfound appreciation for our bodies," Oifesh said. "Other things we worry about on a daily basis seem miniscule afterwards."

Executive assistant and Queens resident Maribeth Mooney heard about the Naked Show from a comedian friend of hers. As someone who believes in body positivity, she wanted to see this new kind of comedy, but when was at the show, she was a little worried. Especially for the women who would be nude in front of a crowd made mostly of men.

"I'll be honest, as a woman, I was nervous for them," Mooney said. "Once they (the comedians) start talking, I forgot they were naked and I was focusing on the joke."

Mooney says the room was filled with an energy different than other comedy shows she's seen in the city. She remembers how the crowd would roar with laughter at a run-of-the-mill joke as if they were not only laughing at the joke, but also cheering on the bravery of the naked comics.

"I think more people should go to this show," she said.

The Home of the Madness

Well-known comedy clubs such as the Comedy Cellar, Caroline's on Broadway and Gotham Comedy Club will rarely allow for experimental comedy shows. They stick with the tried-and-true formula of having popular comics perform for a large audience who buys food and drinks.

However, there is one place that is the home for many experimental shows. All that's required is a quick ride on the 7 train from Manhattan to Long Island City.

The Creek and the Cave Comedy Club is not a name most people will recognize, but comics such as *Saturday Night Live's* Michael Che and Dan Soder from the Showtime TV series, *Billions*, performed there regularly when they started. Owner Rebecca Trent opened the clubs in 2006 and makes sure her venue is a place for both the traditional comedy shows and experimental shows.

"My background is in theater, so I already came to the Creek with an 'anything goes' attitude," Trent said. "One of the best lessons that those young artists taught me was that, above all else, great comedians need permission to fail. They need to be in a room where they can try, where they can write on their feet, where they can bring all those crazy wild ideas in their head to life."

Veteran comic Robert Kelly, 48, started his career in Boston in 1989. With almost 30 years of performance under his belt, he remembers the early years of his career performing in clubs with an audience of just two people. He envies all the new shows younger comedians have available to them because it provides valuable stage time. However, for him, the jokes are what's important.

"The shows help people to get recognition and jobs in the business," he said. "Call me old fashion but for me, writing jokes is tough enough without having to be naked in front of a crowd."

Getting High Off Comedy

When asked why comedians do comedy, most will remark how making a crowd laugh is addictive like a drug. That first hearty laugh from the crowd is the first hit and it gives them a buzz of excitement, and like most drugs, all they want to do is get back on stage so they can do it again and again to get that same feeling. In the case of the Tripping Show at the Creek and the Cave, comics get high off psychedelics right before they go on stage to get high off of the audience.

Thought up by comedian Evan Jones, 29, the concept of the show is simple. Go on stage and perform. The twist is that Jones personally gives the comedian a hit of psychedelic mushrooms minutes beforehand.

"It's an experience," Jones said. "You get connected to the audience because they're connecting to you. It really has you zero in on what you're saying and doing during your routine."

He came up with the idea when a fellow comedian said to him how he would like to perform in front on an audience that were high on psychedelics. Jones took that idea and switched it from the audience being high to the comics. He says performing in front of the crowd while in an altered state actually helped him improve his routine.

"I realized that there were some things I was saying that weren't funny," Jones said. "I ended up dropping those parts out and my whole set ended up being funnier."

One comic who partook in the Tripping Show was Alison Klemp. She performed at the show before she did her first Naked Show. When comparing the two performances, she was much more scared of getting high in front of a crowd than getting naked.

"You can prepare to be naked, but you don't know what it's going to be like when you take mushrooms," Klemp said. "It was fun. Scary, but fun."

On to the Next Gig

Cato is a regular performer at these experimental shows around the city, and they've helped him become a better comic.

"In terms of creativity, I feel more fulfilled and I'm really happy about that," Cato said. "I feel like I'm more honest on stage."

However, being fulfilling his creative side is not enough to pay the bills.

"Monetarily, things could be better," he said followed by a laugh.

His next show will be Monday at Freddy's Bar in Brooklyn. It's a free show so he he'll get paid \$20, but it's close to home and another night of performing in front of a crowd.