



Are You Trying to be Funny?

Notes for Comedians To Be

by

© Ian McFadyen

Melbourne International Comedy Festival
Class Clowns, Australian Comedians In Concert 1996

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Welcome to comedy.

Sometimes people think of comedy as just people being silly but comedy is really one of the most important human activities.

Comedy serves a very important role in human society. It makes us not accept things too readily. It makes question authority by daring to be irreverent. It makes us see ourselves and others from a new angle, it reveals things we haven't thought of before. It helps us to understand what it is to be alive, to suffer, to be human.

Yes, comedy is a serious business.

THE ANCIENT ART.

Comedy is an ancient and noble art. From the time of the ancient Greeks, right up to the present time, two types of drama have been recognised - tragedy and comedy - both of which have always been regarded as being *equally* important.

Tragedy and comedy are sometimes said to be *two sides of the same coin*. The difference between them is not **what** they deal with, but **how** they deal with it. Both deal with ideas such as love and hate, ambition and failure, trust, betrayal, lust, greed, delusion, hate, conspiracy, weakness, betrayal and death, but, while tragedy invites us to look upon these aspects of human behaviour with grief, comedy invites us to *laugh* at them.

COMEDY TODAY.

Today comedy is big business and comic performers are amongst the highest paid in the entertainment industry.

Actors, writers and directors have always been expected to be proficient in both serious drama and comedy but in the reality is in recent years the more successful comedy performers have tended to be *specialists*.

These days successful comic actors are more likely to have come from comedy clubs than from drama school. Robin Williams, Steve Martin, Jim Carrey, Rowan Atkinson, Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders all started as revue and stand-up comedians before working their way into television and films.

Comedy is also good business. A film like "Four Weddings and a Funeral" can make as much from ticket sales as a huge action blockbuster, but costs only a fraction as much to make.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A COMEDIAN ?

It may not be what you think. Being “a funny person” does not mean you will automatically be a good comedian.

There is a big difference between being funny to your friends and being funny to the public. Many people who are hilarious in everyday life would not make good comedians and many good comedians aren't funny at all in real life.

On the other hand, not all comedians are “sad clowns” in their private lives. Many are just as funny off stage as they are on. It just means that all comedians are different.

While having a natural sense of humour is a good start, becoming a comedian requires practice and hard work.

Perhaps the most important requirements to be a good comedian are intelligence, style, commitment and lots of nerve.

WHAT IS GOOD COMEDY?

It's not hard to make people laugh. You can get a laugh by hitting someone in the face with a pie but that doesn't mean it's good comedy.

Good comedy is original. It makes us laugh at something we've never laughed at before. Good comedy makes us realise something is funny for the first time.

Bad comedy makes fun of things we *already* know are funny. Bad comedy is telling old jokes, or making fun of easy targets.

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|---------------------------------|---|------------------------------------------------|
| Good comedy is irreverent | - | Bad comedy is offensive. |
| Good comedy is clever | - | Bad comedy is just someone trying to be smart. |
| Good comedy makes you laugh | - | Bad comedy makes you groan. |
| Good comedy takes a lot of work | - | Bad comedy takes the easy way out. |
| Good comedy tries to be new | - | Bad comedy uses tired old formulas. |
| Good comedy is unique | - | Bad comedy is all the same. |

A QUICK HISTORY OF COMEDY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the first half of the 20th century comedy came mainly from **vaudeville**. (see below). Early movies were silent and so comedy had to be **visual**. Many early comedians such as Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton were brilliant acrobats and trained in vaudeville doing **slapstick** - comedy based on physical stunts.

With the coming of the **talkies** film makers forgot about slapstick and started to concentrate on witty **dialogue**. A lot of successful Broadway playwrights were lured to Hollywood to write films giving rise to the “sophisticated comedies” in the Thirties and Forties.

Humorous books were also been a source of film comedy. For example in Australia, “On Our Selection” gave rise to the “Dad and Dave” films.

In the Forties, **radio** was king with millions of people tuning in each night to listen to comedians such as Jack Benny, Tony Hancock, Roy Rene and George Burns and Gracie Allen.

In the Fifties, radio was swept away overnight by **television**, Although many radio comedians made the jump to television, television soon invented a new form of comedy - the “situation comedy” or **sitcom**. Sitcoms were very economical because they usually just recycled the same set of jokes every week. (“Sorry about that Chief”, “Hey, I’m da Fonze”, “Gilligannnnnn!”)

The Sixties brought the “**satire** boom” with young university students like Peter Cook and Dudley Moore and the Monty Python team sending up British Society. Australia did the same with “Auntie Jack” and “The Mavis Bramston Show” while America produced the psychedelic “Laugh In”.

In the Seventies, film and television comedy went through a dull patch but a new generation of stand-up comedians began appearing in the comedy clubs. Within a few years young comedians like Eddie Murphy, Robin Williams, Lenny Henry and Rowan Atkinson were to become the foundation of a new era of comedy. In Australian, TV shows like The Comedy Company, The Big Gig and Fast Forward were created by performers who started working live in the pubs and clubs.

Today Australian comedy is prospering. Australian acts are acclaimed at the Edinburgh fringe festival and Montreal comedy festival and the Melbourne International Comedy Festival is one of the world’s great comedy events **but...**

Comedy is a dynamic art that relies on a constant stream of new ideas and talent. The public is always ready for a new approach, new ideas, a fresh outlook.

STYLES OF COMEDY.

- Absurdism.** Though often described to (by very boring people) as “zany” or “off-the-wall” comedy this sort of humour seems quite normal to the people who create it such as Spike Milligan or the Monty Python team. Shows like “The Goon Show”, “Aunty Jack” or “Monty Python’s Flying Circus” live in their own unique reality. They are the results of comedy writers letting their imagination run free. Often these shows are hated at first because no one understands them but later become cult classics.
- Satire.** Satire is comedy with a message. It attempts to point out the flaws in something by exaggerating that flaw until it seems totally absurd. Politicians, police and pop stars are favourite targets for satire. It is the most “intellectual” form of comedy and has always been popular amongst young people who want to make fun of authority figures.
- Parody.** Parody is performing a imitation of something such as a song, or a TV show, TV commercial or a film. “Fast Forward” produced many excellent parodies of TV programs. To work, parody must not be just a good imitation it must also be funny.
- Slapstick** Slapstick was derived from circus clowning and was popular in the early days of **vaudeville**. It involved carefully set up *sight gags* including lots of falls and exploding props.
- Physical comedy is ideal for audiences of children and large venues and has become recently become very popular again in troupes such as “Circus Oz”.
- Mime:** Comedy based on creating reality through actions alone. Normally people performing mime are not allowed to speak, although sound effects are often used, and sometimes the odd word is used.
- The challenge of mime is not just give the impression of something happening on the stage but to make it entertaining and amusing.
- Character comedy.** In character comedy, the performer adopts a **persona** (the technical word for a false identity or mask) such as Edna Everage, Kylie Mole, Con The Fruiterer, Uncle Arthur or Effie.
- Many performers like appearing “in character” because it gives them a sense of freedom to do and say things they wouldn’t dare do as themselves.

Stand up comedy. Stand-up comedy is a single comedian standing up in front of an audience. They usually have a microphone on a stand or in their hand.

Some stand-ups just tell jokes. Others do **monologues** which are longer discussions about particular topics.

Monologues are often based on **Observation Comedy**.

Observation Comedy involves talking about funny things you notice in everyday life. An observation comedy monologue usually starts off with something like :

Why is it, when you're driving and you stop at a red light, the person in the car next to you is *always* picking their nose?

Gerry Seinfeld and Jimeoin are examples of successful observation comedians.

Put down comedy. Some stand-ups do **put down comedy** - where you make fun of the audience.

Hey pal, does that shirt have a volume control?

Others just do jokes.

Jokes: are the time honoured standard of comedy and come in many different shapes and forms. They can be:

(a) a story with a funny ending - "These two blokes were walking along the road.... etc

(b) Question and answer "Why did the chicken cross the road?"

(c) A standard format "Knock Knock."

It is generally recognised that good jokes are the hardest things to write. Comedians used to build their acts up out of collections of jokes they had heard over the years. Today the most successful comedians write their own material, but many comedians still basically re-tell jokes they have heard from others.

- Spots** A comedian's part in a show is called a "spot" and can be from five minutes long to a whole show. While a performer like Billy Connolly can be on stage, alone, for three hours without an interval, in most comedy venues a spot is likely to be about 10 to 20 minutes.
- Double act.** Some comedians work in pairs. A favourite arrangement has always been the straight man/funny man combination like Abbot and Costello. In this type of act one person acts serious while the other one is the fool. The straight man tries to have a serious conversation with the funny man but always gets silly answers.
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|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Straight man. | What's the matter with you? |
| Funny man. | I had a terrible morning. I had to shoot my dog. |
| Straight man | Was he mad? |
| Funny man | Well he wasn't happy about it. |
- Routines** Double acts rely on well rehearsed pieces called "routines". A classic example of a routine is Abbot and Costello's famous "Who's on First?". (see appendix)
- Sketch comedy:** A sketch is like a very short play. It usually has a set and the performers are characters in costume.
- Comedy shows sometimes contain very short sketches which tell a single joke and then cut abruptly. These are called **blackouts**.
- Ensemble comedy.** Comedians often form teams or groups like Monty Python or The D-Generation. These groups can then employ a number of comedy techniques including, stand-up, sketches, character comedy and musical parody.
- Vaudeville** Was a popular form of theatre in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Vaudeville shows featured magicians, jugglers, singers, dancers, acrobats, animals and comedy acts. The audiences were often noisy and abusive and performers had to do several shows a day.
- It is said that radio and television "killed" vaudeville, but over the last ten years, the growth of comedy clubs and theatre restaurants has brought about a revival of this sort of entertainment. Many comedy acts today are very similar to traditional vaudeville.

DEVELOPING COMEDY

The comedy you do will be a result of your own personal sense of humour. It will come from working on the things you find funny.

While everyone can repeat a joke, or perform a famous comedy routine, to succeed in comedy you have to develop your own personal style and your own personal areas of interest.

The styles and formats described above can be combined in all sorts of different ways. You can have a double act which performs mime [like The Umbilical Brothers], a stand-up who performs musical parody or an ensemble who appear as a range of different characters.

GETTING STARTED.

If you are unsure where to start here are some basic questions you might want to ask.

1. Do I have a talent for transforming myself into a certain character?
2. Do I have the ability to talk in voices or accents?
3. Do I have the ability to imitate a particular person such as a famous actor or politician?
4. Can I write good parodies of TV shows or funny lyrics for songs?
5. Can I write funny conversations between people?
6. Am I good at "observation humour."
7. Are there things about life that drive me crazy and I just want to send them up?
8. Am I funny when I get angry? (or just scary)
9. Can I perform mime, or good visual comedy?
10. Do I have an unusual slant on things and I see things differently to other people?

CREATING COMEDY MATERIAL

1. Pick a topic.

Start with something you know, such as your own life.

Once you start thinking about it you will find there are dozens of topics you might explore: parents, teachers, television shows, movies, television commercials, music, radio announcers, current fashions, the school principal, your friends, sports, toys, fast foods and public transport.

HINT: Carry a notebook with you at all times and write down anything that might be useful. Write down anything that you find odd or amusing. Sometimes funny thoughts just occur to you. Make sure you write them down before you forget them.

2. Find an angle.

Comedy is about **using technique**. Just talking about a topic usually isn't enough. You have to make it funny.

There are a number of techniques which comedians use to put the comic "spin" on a topic. Most of these involve some sort of **comic exaggeration**.

Such as:

1. Taking to Extremes

...Have you noticed how computer magazines these days all have CD-ROMs taped to the cover. Now *other* magazines are starting to do it. The other day I saw a copy of "Wheels" magazine with a Diahatsu on the front.

...Are conservationists getting too fanatical? I went out to mow the lawn on Sunday and fifteen Greenies came in and lay down in front of the lawn mower. They chained themselves to the grass catcher... etc

Films are getting very violent. Even children's movies. Have you seen the summer releases from America. American Tail 3 - Feivel Gets a Gun, The Aristocats meet Reservoir Dogs, Bambi - The Revenge: Now the hunters are the hunted...etc

These type of routines takes something which is happening in the world and takes it to extremes.

Practice: Try extending the ideas above. How far can you take the idea?

2. What if?

Sometimes the angle is to do the opposite of real life. For example:
What if TV commercials, actually *told the truth* about what they were selling?

TV AD (Very fast and loud like a hard-sell TV ad)

New from Toytell the toy that's guaranteed to break before you even get it out of the box! That's right the new Monstematic! Looks great on TV but GUARANTEED to be cheap and poorly made in real life. Ring this number now and we even WON'T include batteries. That's right you'll have to buy fifteen batteries that will run down in five minutes, but **that's not all**. Ring now and we'll throw in, for just another fifty dollars, this hideous and probably toxic set of action figures that will provide microseconds of fun before they break into hundreds of small sharp pieces you can step on when you get out of the shower. Monstematic and Hideous Figures. Steal your parents' credit cards and ring this number NOW!!

PRACTICE: Try using this technique with other products and see what you come up with.

There are many possible "What If?" routines, for example:
What if adults acted like kids?

MOTHER WALKS INTO THE ROOM. FATHER IS READING THE PAPER.

Mother: Come on dear, get up, it's time to go to work.

Father: (LIKE A 3 YEAR OLD) NO! I don't want to go to work.

Mother: Now come on dear...

Father: No I won't. I won't. don't want to go to work. I hate work. I'm never going to work again.

Mother: Don't be silly dear, you know you've got to go.

Father: I don't! I won't. I hate it. I hate it. Everyone there is stupid and Mr McKenzie hates me.

Mother: He doesn't hate you.

Father: He hates me, he hates me! They all hate me and I hate them. Anyway I don't care. They're all stupid and I'm not going ever again.

Mother: Darling you better get ready before your son comes in.

THEIR 6 YEAR OLD SON ENTERS THE ROOM. HE SPEAKS LIKE AN ADULT.

Son. All right, what's going on?

Mother: He says he doesn't want to go to work.

Son. Now listen...

Mother: Now Gary don't lose your temper.

Son. I'm not going to lose my temper but I'm sick and tired of this nonsense. He's got to go to work and that's that!

Father. (CRYING) I won't. I won't.

Son: Now Dad. Listen. You want that new car don't you.

Father: (STILL SOBBING) Yes....

Son. And you want that new Makita drill don't you?

Father: Yes....

Son. Well if you want them, you're going to have to go to work....

etc.

PRACTICE: Finish this scene. How do they get the father to go to work?

4. The unexpected turn.

A joke can work by creating an expectation and then turning it around:

The first school I went to was very rough. They were punching each other in the playground, setting fire to the buildings, stealing cars.... and that was the *teachers*.

Here is a sketch that works by taking off in an unexpected direction.

POLICE PHOTOGRAPHER.

A rough looking bloke enters and stands against a police line-up wall with height markings on it. A uniformed Police Photographer is standing in front with a camera on a tripod.

PHOTOGRAPHER: Okay, stand against the wall.

The crim stands against the wall.

PHOTOGRAPHER: Hold up the sign.

The crim holds up the card with a number on it. The camera flashes.

PHOTOGRAPHER: Now turn to your right.

The crim turns in profile. The camera flashes again.

PHOTOGRAPHER: Turn your head towards the camera.

The crim turns his head slightly. The camera flashes again.

PHOTOGRAPHER: Drop your shoulder.

The crim, drops his shoulder.

PHOTOGRAPHER: No, tougher, look tougher.

The crim snarls.

PHOTOGRAPHER: That's good. That's good. And again. Even tougher. Really snarl. Yes, that's great. Now clench your fists. That's fantastic. That's beautiful.

The photographer takes the camera off the tripod and starts moving around the room taking dozens of photos as the crim poses in different positions. It is like a fashion shoot for a magazine.

PHOTOGRAPHER: Just drop the shoulder, and chin up and ... beautiful, and give me sinister, really sinister, good and more creepy, sneer, sneer like you've just bashed someone, fantastic, gorgeous....

5. Changing Contexts

Sometimes we can show how strange certain behaviour is by moving it into a different context. The sketch below is about television newsreaders. It is based on the *What if*: "What if newsreaders talked in their private lives, like they do on camera?"

NEWSPARTY

A GROUP OF TELEVISION NEWS READERS ARE MILLING AROUND THE ROOM AT A CONFERENCE". A MAN MOVES THROUGH THE ROOM WITH A GLASS IN HIS HAND. HE BUMPS INTO A GIRL.

KEN: Hello, I'm Ken Cardigan.

JANE And I'm Jane Michaels. Nice to be with you.

KEN: Thanks Jane. You look well this evening and if I'm not mistaken you've done something with your hair.

JANE; As a matter of face I have Ken. For years spiky or tangled tresses have been a woman's crowning glory but now hair experts agree that ragged locks are a thing of the past. The long and short of it is that long and short hair is back.

KEN: I see Jane. So you've in fact had a hairdo.

JANE: Top marks Ken. That's correct.

KEN: Other stories in tonight's conversation include my childhood: a behind-the-scenes look at exactly what makes a man become a newsreader. We'll also be bringing you startling new claims regarding my masculinity. Further news on that as it comes to hand. The question now is, Kate, how would you like to dance? And we'll be finding the answer to that question, after this break.

THEY BOTH SMILE TO CAMERA.

Finally...

These notes are not supposed to tell you what to do.

They are just some examples of what other people do.

There are dozens of techniques which can be used. The important thing is to find your own style and come up with your own tricks.

This is what will make your comedy original, unique and entertaining.

So while we don't want to tell you what to do, here are a few hints about **what NOT to do.**

A short list of DON'TS.

Don't do

- In Jokes. A In-Joke is a joke that is only understood by a small group of people, for example, your own group of friends.
- Cheap shots. A cheap shot is a joke at the expense of an easy target: someone who can't defend themselves, someone who doesn't really deserve to have a joke like that made.
- Tired old jokes. Don't do jokes everyone has heard before.
- Offensive Jokes. There is an art in being provocative without being offensive. Good comedians have the ability to make fun of issues with angering people.
- Jokes which are sexist or racist might get a laugh in the back room but they will not help a career in comedy.

APPENDIX 1

One of the main functions of comedy is to expose hypocrisy and delusion.

The Emperor's New Clothes

Once there was an Emperor who was very vain. One day a pair of swindlers came to him and presented a set of "magic clothes". Only a wise man can see these clothes, they said, to a fool they are invisible. Of course there were no clothes there at all.

Not wishing to appear a fool the Emperor pretended he could see the clothes and put them on. The rest of the court were invited to inspect the new clothes. They too, not wishing to appear foolish, claimed they could "see" the clothes.

The next day the Emperor rode through the town in a grand parade, stark naked. All the people, who had heard about the clothes commented on how wonderful the Emperor's new attire was... except one little boy. He hadn't heard about the magic suit and cried out in horror "The Emperor is not wearing any clothes." Then all the people saw the truth and laughed and the Emperor realised what a trick had been played on him.

Comedians are sometimes like the boy in the story.

When the little boy spoke, the one "reality" suddenly snapped into a different reality. The Emperor's perception "I am a very clever Emperor wearing a fabulous suit of clothes" in one microsecond turned into "I am a very silly Emperor who is riding through the town naked."

That sudden changing of our view of things is one of the main elements of comedy. Comedy reveals the (often the unpleasant) truth in situations.

WHO'S ON FIRST

by Abbott and Costello

ABBOTT Alright, now whaddya want?

COSTELLO Now look, I'm the head of the sports department. I gotta know
the baseball players' names. Do you know the guys' names?

ABBOTT Oh sure.

COSTELLO So go ahead and tell me some of their names.

ABBOTT Well, I'll introduce you to the boys. You know sometimes
nowadays they give ball players peculiar names.

COSTELLO You mean funny names.

ABBOTT Nicknames, pet names, like Dizzy Dean --

COSTELLO His brother Daffy --

ABBOTT Daffy Dean --

COSTELLO And their cousin!

ABBOTT Who's that?

COSTELLO Goofy!

ABBOTT Goofy, huh? Now we have Hoo on first base, Watt on second
base, Idunno on third base.

COSTELLO That's what I wanna find out.

ABBOTT I say Hoo's on first, Watts on second, Idunno's on third --

COSTELLO You know the fellows' names?

ABBOTT Certainly!

COSTELLO Well then who's on first?

ABBOTT Yes!

COSTELLO I mean the fellow's name!

ABBOTT Hoo!

COSTELLO The guy on first!

ABBOTT Hoo!

COSTELLO The first baseman!

ABBOTT Hoo!

COSTELLO The guy playing first!

ABBOTT Hoo is on first!

COSTELLO Whaddya askin' me for?

ABBOTT I'm telling you Hoo is on first.

COSTELLO Well, I'm asking YOU who's on first!

ABBOTT That's the man's name.

COSTELLO That's who's name?

ABBOTT Yes.

COSTELLO Well go ahead and tell me.

ABBOTT Hoo.

COSTELLO The guy on first.

ABBOTT Hoo!

COSTELLO The first baseman.

ABBOTT Hoo is on first!

COSTELLO Have you got a contract with the first baseman?

ABBOTT Absolutely.

COSTELLO Who signs the contract?

ABBOTT Well, naturally!

COSTELLO When you pay off the first baseman every month, who gets the money?

ABBOTT Every dollar. Why not? The man's entitled to it.

COSTELLO Who is?

ABBOTT Yes. Sometimes his wife comes down and collects it.

COSTELLO Who's wife?

ABBOTT Yes.

COSTELLO All I'm tryin' to find out is what's the guy's name on first base.

ABBOTT Oh, no -- wait a minute, don't switch 'em around. Watt is on second base.

COSTELLO I'm not askin' you who's on second.

ABBOTT Hoo is on first.

COSTELLO I don't know.

ABBOTT He's on third -- we're not talkin' about him.

COSTELLO Now, how did I get on third base?

ABBOTT You mentioned his name!

COSTELLO If I mentioned the third baseman's name, who did I say is playing third?

ABBOTT No -- Hoo's playing first.

COSTELLO Never mind first -- I wanna know what's the guy's name on third.

ABBOTT No -- Watt's on second.

COSTELLO I'm not askin' you who's on second.

ABBOTT Hoo's on first.

COSTELLO I don't know.

ABBOTT He's on third.

COSTELLO Aaah! Would you please stay on third base and don't go off it?

ABBOTT What was it you wanted?

COSTELLO Now who's playin' third base?

ABBOTT Now why do you insist on putting Hoo on third base?

COSTELLO Why? Who am I putting over there?

ABBOTT Yes. But we don't want him there.

COSTELLO What's the guy's name on third base?

ABBOTT Watt belongs on second.

COSTELLO I'm not askin' you who's on second.

ABBOTT Hoo's on first.

COSTELLO I don't know.

A&C THIRD BASE!....

(The routine goes on to cause more confusion with a fielder called "Why", a pitcher called "Tomorrow", a catcher called "Today".)

Ian McFadyen is an Australian writer, actor, director, producer, academic and social commentator.

His work covers a wide range from books and essays on sociology, politics, criminology and science to plays and film scripts. He is also one of Australia's best known humorists and comedy writers.

He created and produced "THE COMEDY COMPANY" - one of Australia's highest ever rating comedy series - and produced the cult sitcom classic "LET THE BLOOD RUN FREE"

The Melbourne International Comedy Festival is one of the three largest comedy Festivals in the world, with the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and Montreal's Just for Laughs Festival.

The Festival was launched in Melbourne in 1987 by Barry Humphries and Peter Cook. It was created to showcase the city's abundant local comic talent, and to provide local audiences with access to the finest contemporary comedy from Australia and overseas.

First held in 1996, **Class Clowns** is a national high school comedy competition produced by MICF. During February and March, professional comedians visit local performing arts centres to hold workshops with students in Years 9 to 12. After a short break (sometimes it's lunch, sometimes it's the weekend), the comedian comperes a public performance.

These performances are judged, and local heats cascade into regional and state finals, and ultimately the national grand final held in the main Melbourne Town Hall during the Comedy Festival.

For more information on Class Clowns and the Comedy Festival Education Programme, please visit our website www.comedyfestival.com.au