

***Funny Business: Making
Others Laugh for a Living***
By MARK HENRICKS

Growing up, Shannon Gettins was class clown and carried that attitude into a four-year stint in marketing job at Yahoo Inc. "For a person who jokes around all the time, it was a great place to work, very young and fun," Ms. Gettins says.

But eventually, she felt less comfortable. "When you work in a cube eight to 10 hours a day, you start to question things," she says. Without being sure what she wanted, she left Yahoo in 2002 and, after several other jobs, enrolled in a stand-up comedy class.

Coached by her teacher, she began testing routines on open-microphone nights at comedy clubs in Los Angeles. She wrote jokes and speeches for others and started a business teaching stand-up to high-school students. "I look back and say, 'I had money, I had a 401(k), I had health benefits,' " she says. "But I definitely am happier now. And in the past six months, I've made a living doing what I love to do."

Making a living as a comic is no laughing matter, according to Judy Carter, who taught Ms. Gettins at her Venice, Calif., comedy workshop. "I'd say 20% of my students go on to have a career in comedy," Ms. Carter says. "Of the 20%, a small percentage become successful."

Still, drawn more than anything by the desire to express themselves and make people laugh, they keep coming. Beginners will encounter bruising travel schedules, annoying hecklers and fierce competition from other comics on the way to what is, at best, an uncertain success.

After more than 20 years as a humorist, Ms. Carter also adds humor doing standup at corporate meetings and conventions, where she may earn \$15,000 for a speech. She works a few engagements each month, many in top tourist spots. She says she earns good living. "I say, 'See my home, it cost me 5,000 jokes,' " she says.

Few comics are drawn to the field for financial reasons, however. "If they are, they get cured of that pretty quickly," says Barb North, a talent manager in Woodland Hills, Calif. Would-be comics may range from airline pilots and attorneys to waitresses, she says. Most have two things in common: They think they are funny, and they need to learn that there is more to comedy than being funny.

Veteran comics say even gifted jokesters need classes to learn how to craft routines, handle hecklers and get jobs. From class, most go to open-mic nights, where pay is nonexistent. Next they typically serve as opening act or master of ceremonies at a comedy club, earning \$50 or so for a five-minute routine. Featured acts appear in the middle of a typical comedy show, receiving \$100 or so for a nightly 10-minute act. Headliners may have a half hour and earn from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars.

Even those sums are scarce in comedy meccas such as Los Angeles and New York. There, competition is fierce for opportunities to be seen by a television producer or sitcom talent scout, Ms. North says. "Everybody is vying for stage time, and incredibly successful comedians are in town willing to work for nothing," she says.

Rebecca Arthur, who began doing stand-up about five years ago, won a contest as "California's Funniest Woman" in 2004, but earns little more than pocket money with her act. Ms. Arthur is a public-transit grants administrator in Fullerton, Calif. She says some clubs require comics to bring a number of friends to pay cover charges before granting stage time, a demand she finds troubling. "Number one, I don't have friends. I don't have that kind of personality," says Ms. Arthur, a 6-foot-4-inch performer with a dour demeanor. "And if you've been doing comedy five years, your friends are burned out on your act."

Many comics tour constantly, which may lead to travel burnout and can be hard on relationships. Others station themselves in smaller cities. John Garrison is a software developer who moonlights as a comedian in St. Louis, where there are fewer comedy venues but also fewer comedians. "Location is critical in terms of stage time," he says. "Obviously, the only way you're going to get good is getting on stage as much as you can." If, as he hopes, his career continues developing, Mr. Garrison may move to Los Angeles or New York.

The bigger the stage, of course, the brighter the light. And that heightens the likelihood and the impact of rejection, an ever-present risk. "It's a very naked experience," explains Ms. North. "It's just you, and there's not too much else you can blame it on."

Fighting for stage time, dealing with rejection and coping with paltry pay are worth it for comedians who get their kicks by giving others theirs. "I love making people laugh," Ms. Gettins says. "To get up on stage and make an entire room of people crack up is a feeling you can't replace."