

Re-print of Steve's on-line interview for Suck, July 15, 1999

Comedy is not pretty. Most of the time it's not even funny. If you're an underachieving class clown looking to punch up your Pauly Shore stylings, take a few lessons from Steve North, LA's own comedy coach, and you'll be makin' 'em laugh like Donald O'Connor in no time.

In a sort of paraphrase of the old adage about there being no such thing as a bad kid, North assures customers that they all have some humor in them. Which is lucky because, while we always figured we were doing some truly classic comedy, we get enough of your "Is this sucky site supposed to be funny?" emails that we decided to turn to North for some comedy coaching.

How big is the comedy coach industry?

I'm not the only one but I'm probably the best known. I know of a few guys in other cities. Originally, I didn't do this for a living. I used to rob banks. No, just kidding.

Do you need natural born comedians, or can you turn a dud into a laffmaster?

Basically, my concept is that everyone has a part of him that's funny, so I try to do the opposite of what a psychiatrist does. A psychiatrist tries to make you act better; I try to get you back in touch with that lunatic inside you. I don't turn anybody down. Well, occasionally I'll turn somebody down. If I get a call from a guy who's like, (incoherent imbecile voice) "bluhuhuhuhuhuh," I'll say, "Well, thanks a lot." I was once challenged by the Los Angeles Times reporter Mike Arkush to make him funny in three weeks. At the end of that he did seven minutes of stand-up and he did pretty well.

Is it possible to be dangerously funny?

Picture two yous: One is the normal, logical you; the other is the insane part you ordinarily would try to suppress. It's the process of bringing out that lunatic. Bob Newhart isn't exactly a wild and crazy guy. Neither is Steven Wright ... you'd expect him to be a computer programmer. With some people, their comedic character is so close to their normal character that they're always ending up in mental institutions. Richard Pryor's funny part was so close to his normal character that it caused him problems.

Have you unbalanced anybody?

Oh yeah. I've fought people's therapists. I'm at war with one comedian's therapist. I'll get the comedian funny and then the therapist will say, "Oh no, you can't make jokes about competing with your mother because we're working on that." Think about when you get in front of a camera. You put on this fake smile. People do the same in front of audiences. We get them to stop suppressing that. There's a lot of technology involved.

What kind of technology?

There are a lot of zones we concentrate on to make people less conscious of the audience. For example, my character is a guy whose only goal is to make himself as comfortable as possible. I'll say, "My feet are too hot in my gym shoes," and the audience will laugh because that's my character. And sometimes when I find myself trying to impress an audience, I'll try to get away from that by focusing on a facet of that character, the way Johnny Carson used his Jack Benny reaction. What doesn't work is words or intellectual concepts such as, "I'm going to be angry," because words don't get you focused. If you want to be angry, you would think about, for example, somebody hitting your car.

Is there ever a time when a comedian's dying to tell his or her audience, "The only reason you're not laughing at my stuff is that *you don't get it, you idiots.*"

Now you're into a whole other zone. The trick with stand-up, like a movie or a TV show, is that the audience suspends its disbelief. You'd never make a reference to the fact that you're making a joke or entertaining people. You need to stick to your agenda. Rodney Dangerfield's agenda is to convince you that he wants respect. Or Seinfeld's is to convince you that all the stupid shit he talks about is really important.

Do you get a lot of "crying on the inside" types who feel they have to touch their own pain to be funny?

The first thing is to teach people to see what's funny about whatever's bothering them. In comedy there always has to be an element of the absurd. Sympathy kills laughter. There's an old rule: A little girl who slips on the ice and cuts her knee is drama; an old man who slips on a banana peel and falls into a taco cart is comedy. He might get hurt worse, but the situation is so absurd that the audience is distanced from any sympathy for him. Comedians always need to put some distance between themselves and the audience, the way Sam Kinison does by cursing out the audience.

Do you prefer newer more streety comedy or classic comedy?

I don't care what it is as long as there's a touch of reality to it. The problem with 90 percent of the people you see in the Comedy Store or on TV is that it's all observational humor with no reality to it. I don't care what it is as long as it's coming from the gut. I believe everybody has a part of him that's funny. I don't see it so much in terms of how many punch lines you have.

So setups and punch lines aren't important?

Well, if you do it right there're headers and leaders. If you just do setups and punch lines you sound like Henny Youngman, "Guy goes to the doctor. The doctor says, ..." You're just doing jokes.

I thought Henny Youngman was pretty funny.

Yeah, but you can do a setup that's not so mechanical. You could phrase it conversationally "I've got a doctor's appointment tomorrow but I'm kind of nervous. I'm afraid I might test positive for DNA."

What is the right amount of time to wait between setup and punch line?

That's like asking how long you should wait between notes if you're a singer. The real key is attitude. I have one attitude that works for me; somebody else would have a different attitude.

Is the picture of you with the captain's hat part of your "comfortable" persona?

Yeah, the captain's hat is really stupid isn't it? I wear it because I hope it'll make people do what I tell them to. My wife and I are TV producers, and I used to wear a captain's hat in the '80s. Eventually I became known as the guy in the captain's hat, and it became something that helped me get work. So sometimes I'll get somebody in the audience saying, "You're doing *The Captain & Tennille*." And I'll say, "Screw you, I was wearing it before he was."

So you do flip out at the audiences sometimes?

No, because that reaction belongs to the character I'm in. But again, you can't break that suspension of disbelief.

Our site is called Suck.com. Is there any point in our trying to "work clean?"

I kinda like the name. But of course, it means you're going to attract people who are sort of, [leering moron voice] "Oh, let's go see Suck.com." It depends on how well the name fits your attitude. What do you do? What's your attitude?

I don't know. Mostly we do a lot of half-assed commentary. We do a lot of media commentary. Speaking of which, who do you think is a better bet for comedy: Dan Rather or Peter Jennings?

Oh God. Jesus. You've picked two people who have nothing funny about them at all. I mean, Dan Rather can you picture him getting naked and yelling, "Yahoo!"?

Well no, but if he did, it would be pretty damn funny.

I have to pick one of them? I hate tests like this "Would you rather be burned alive or die slowly of cancer?" I'll go with Dan Rather.

Are Jews definitely funnier than Gentiles?

Yeah, except for Steve Martin. But then Steve Martin's not funny anymore.

Are Canadians funnier than Americans?

The first thing they've got to do is finish their country and then we'll talk. Nice people though.

Who's the least funny person in America right now?

Dan Quayle.

Does he have any value as a comedy target anymore?

No, he's just the annoying kid you want to beat up in school, who sucks up to the teacher, wants to hang around you when you don't want him around, and threatens to have his big brother beat you up.

Are there any ethnic groups it's still cool to make fun of?

You can always get away with it if you stay within the pecking order. If you're a white male, you're at the top of the pecking order and can only get away with making fun of other white males. If you're Jewish, you can get away with making fun of other Jews and white males. If you're black, you can get away with making fun of pretty much anybody. Think of it this way: The student can make fun of the teacher, the teacher can make fun of the principal, and the principal can maybe make fun of the school board. But it can't go the other way. The unempowered can make fun of the empowered.

In *Punchline*, did you believe for one second that Tom Hanks was this tormented comedy genius?

Good question, but that's what I call a setup so strong that I would just ruin it with a punch line.

We've been talking for a couple of minutes now. Do you have any sense of what I could do to funny myself up?

Struggle harder to be meaningful so it becomes clear that being meaningful is futile. See, a lot of times your comedic character is just your strengths running out. If you pretend everything has this big meaning it becomes funnier because it's clear it doesn't have some big meaning.

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