

The Stand-Up Comic

I was thumbing through a course book for L.A. City College one night and came across something that looked like fun — stand-up comedy.

It was only four classes and it only cost \$70. I could afford that. Plus, it was only once a week for two hours at night. That was not a big commitment time-wise, so I figured I might try it. I had always liked the idea of trying to do stand-up.

I have always liked a good challenge.

I thought I'd start my stand up like this:

“Ladies and gentlemen, I want to thank you for coming to my stand up comedy presentation. I was thinking it would be fun to do something scary, because I'm always on the lookout for something challenging and it was a toss-up between taking a stand up comedy class or skydiving. I thought to myself, What if I chose the sky diving class, and as I jumped out of the plane, I realized I'd forgotten my parachute? I would hate that feeling of knowing during a good ten minutes of falling and bumming that I should've just taken that stupid comedy claaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaassssssssssssssssssssssss, as I fell to my death.”

That probably would've been a funny way to start a stand-up comedy bit. But, since I had zero experience being a stand-up comic, I really didn't know what would work or what wouldn't.

So, I picked the stand-up comedy class instead of the sky diving class; I figured, if I screwed up in the comedy class I would at least not physically die, like I might with skydiving. That would be a terrible way to go, just falling and knowing that there was no way out of it and that it would be a few minutes of falling and then I would splat on the ground and for the first millisecond I would feel it and it would really hurt, before the lights went out permanently. What a yucky feeling that would be, all the way doooooooooooooown.

Then again, I guess a worse feeling would be if I was stuck in a fire in a big building when it was burning and I was trying to decide if I should die burning to death in a horrible, slow agonizing way, or jump out the window.

Fortunately, I haven't had to choose a fate like that.

Actually, I just found out from a friend the other day that, according to him, some secret survey was taken and the number one thing most people were afraid of was public speaking. Fear of actual death, was only number seven. So, people would rather DIE, than speak in public, which is the same thing as stand-up comedy, sort of. So, in a way, I tried to do something that was scarier than actual death, at least for some people.

I signed up for the stand-up comedy class and paid my little \$70 and marked it in my calendar.

The night finally came, and I drove on over to the L.A. City College campus and found out where to go and showed up. It was a pretty dirty and beat-up campus, nothing like the one I grew up around at Dartmouth, an Ivy League campus full of rich kids, which was absolutely beautiful everywhere.

This was just an inner city college campus of beat-up old buildings, dingy old shrubbery, and crappy stuff everywhere. But it was a beginning, a start, and who was I to judge that place anyways? I figured it would be the least intimidating place on the planet. I figured it would be just a bunch of random people in a little classroom and that I would be the best, by far, and that I could easily handle something like that. I really didn't know what to expect, other than it was only \$70, and if it stunk, I would just write it off as another bad experiment in life that didn't work out, like all the other times.

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I found the room and walked in and sat in the back. There were about 20 students in the classroom once everyone filed in. The age range was about 25 to 60, all sizes and shapes, men and women, housewives, random people, black, white, Mexican, pretty much a little cross section of America right there, sittin' around me.

My fellow students didn't look all that smart or funny and I was not at all scared to be in the classroom with them. The teacher was all angry and bitter about having to teach a comedy class to loser, wanna-be comedians.

It wasn't a very intimidating class, that's for sure. A lot of the students would just rant and rave about their bad childhoods. I guess comedy for some people is just a cheap form of therapy, or maybe they have a thing for abuse, or maybe a little of both.

Then again, comedians may just be crazy people who get a break and find an angle for making things funny. Who knows? This was just a simple four session, stupid comedy class, and for our final "paper" we had to do a gig at the Ice House in Pasadena.

The problem was, I have an intense fear of public speaking and can't even make a toast at a wedding or anything like that. So, to go up on stage, in front of strangers for ten minutes, by myself, and try to make them laugh is probably a pretty big jump for an agoraphobic, introverted extrovert like me.

But I did it anyways.

Probably because when I was a kid, I told myself that I wanted to be whatever was the hardest thing I could find. I guess having a stepfather who was the debate team captain at Harvard, a professional speaker and on the lecture circuit, and basically a narcissistic personality type might've exacerbated my little fear of public speaking. One can only speculate.

I figured that a stand-up comedy class would be the perfect thing to overcome my fear of public speaking; I mean, how hard could it be?

One of the guys in the class was Christian Slater's father. He introduced himself as Christian Slater's father and went on a ten-minute rant about how his son wouldn't help him get any work and that he was a no-good kid and how fucked up his life was, etc. It was actually pretty entertaining listening to this poor old guy.

There were school teachers there and fat housewives, and skinny Asian girls who talked about being immigrants in Hollywood with 24 of their relatives in a one-bedroom apartment and how the toilet couldn't handle all that pooh, and so there was pooh all over the tub and it was GROSS, man!

The class was a lot of regular people all wanting to be stand-up comics because somewhere someone must have said they were funny.

I know I'm funny, because I can make people laugh all the time. I do it even when I'm NOT trying to make them laugh. They laugh even harder during those times because the subject matter of what I say is funny, and of course my delivery is impeccable.

The subject of my funny stuff is simply this: true stories of how things have gone wrong in my life. That's it. Since SO many things have gone wrong in my life, I literally have four hours of nonstop material.

I've been conned, ripped off, lied to, cheated, fired, blamed for things I didn't do, busted, grounded, lost, blackmailed, threatened to be killed, attacked, chased, molested, abandoned, sold out, scared to death, framed; you name it, I've been at the butt-end of it.

Since I'm such a super evolved and positive person, I've learned how to make the best of it and use it as material for my stand-up act.

My favorite self-help book slogan for this type of situation is, "Turning Stumbling Blocks into Stepping Stones."

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I have no shortage of messed-up things that have happened to me, which I can remember in Technicolor detail for some weird reason, and I don't mind sharing them with you, the friendly reader.

When I visit with my therapist, I usually practice my stand-up material with him, because so many bad things happen to me and the way I tell the stories always cracks up my therapist. It's actually really fun going to my therapist; all I do is try out new jokes on him and tell true stories. Fortunately for me, most of my stories sound so far-fetched that people assume they're made up. Little do they realize that they're actually 99% true.

There was this one guy in class that was a total psycho and cracked me up. He was bald, probably in his mid 40's, and was always sweating and really hyper. He'd get up in front of the class and do his act and he was so bizarre and strange. He would tell a really stupid joke, and make a really dumb face, and then sprint to the other side of the room and tell another stupid joke, make another crazy face, and sprint back to where he started. Over and over, he'd be running and sprinting and sweating and joking and grimacing. He was way out there. There was also this really funny, depressed, angry Englishman, with the great accent and the whole bit. He would tell his English jokes and was super funny, but he would always be putting himself down after his jokes (not to be funny, but for real), and then apologize for not being funny (which the whole time was really funny), and then say how he shouldn't be trying this and who was he kidding, etc.

I would talk with him after class and say, "Man, you gotta incorporate your low self-esteem into your act. It's really funny. No one will know that you aren't really pretending to be all bummed out and self-loathing. You might as well cash in on his negativity because if you're gonna be that way anyways, why not make a buck out of it?"

He ended up flaking on the final test — our live show at the Ice House in Pasadena. I was hoping that he would've had the balls to show up, but he didn't. Let me tell you, oh fine reader, it takes BALLS to do stand up when you're afraid of speaking in public, or when you're afraid, in general, to speak up at all, and then to do it all publicly at a comedy club in front of a REAL audience.

I'm serious, man; it's no JOKE, being a stand-up comic. It's scary as hell. Because let's just be honest: most of these people in my stupid L.A. Community College four hour comedy class were just a bunch of would-be-loser-comic-schmucks. But the class was fun, and I was probably in the "more funny" category with about five others. We all knew who we were and we all stuck together. The funny people know who they are in life, in general, and maybe they stick together or maybe they don't, but in this class, we stuck together.

I had a video camera that I used to practice with. It was a really good tool. I'd do stand up in my living room with a microphone and just start going and going. I would do about 45 minutes of stand up and then stop and watch the magic unfold. I thought the WHOLE thing was funny, which made it hard to tell what other people would like, because, quite frankly, it really didn't matter what I thought, because I was not the audience. YOU are. If I think everything I say is funny and no one else does, then that just makes me crazy, and everyone knows that crazy people don't make very much money. Well, some of them do, but they're crazy in different ways than stand-up comedy, or maybe they're good at something that pays a lot, and then they act crazy later, or something.

Either way, I knew that in order for me to pull off this comedy thing, I would have to pick my best material. Plus, I only had ten minutes on stage, so I had to pick SOMETHING. I kind of had an idea of what was my best material and sort of created my act.

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I called my ex-girlfriend Karen, a professional stage actress who could do everything, including comedy. I figured she would be a good person to show some of my ideas. She said it was cool, to come over and bring my video camera and do my thing.

So, I went over there and stood in front of her and my little video camera and proceeded to tell her a bunch of funny stories. She cracked up all the way through most of it and after about 45 minutes, I stopped.

She told me what she liked the best and what she thought worked the best and told me what to cut out and all that good stuff. It really helped.

I, of course, was careful NOT to bring up the wishbone incident in my act in front of her, because she was in that story and I figured that it wouldn't be wise to make fun of her right to her face.

Which makes me wonder — what if I joke on people and they show up at my gigs? Then what? What if I joke on my family members and someone shows up? I guess I'll just have to cross that bridge when I get there.

The time came to do our big show at the world famous Ice House in Pasadena, California. Only about half of the class showed up. The rest just chickened out. I was pretty confident that I would do okay. I figured if I didn't faint, actually pass out, and if I got just ONE laugh, I would be a success. That's all I really wanted, was to not faint, and get ONE laugh.

I had invited a few friends and my old pal Brentley and his girlfriend were there. At least someone showed up to see me, and that's all that mattered. There were about 50 other people in the audience plus our class and their friends and family so it was a pretty decent turnout. I brought my video camera to document this momentous event, and I'm glad I did. When it was my turn, I was so scared and nervous. I was just hating life. I went up there and the dumb M.C. pronounced my name wrong. Not off to a good start.

My first couple of dumb stories didn't get any laughs at all. I was bombing. I knew it, the audience knew it, and we were stuck with each other for the next ten minutes. Eventually, I warmed up and got a couple little teeny-weeny laughs here and there, and then I started doing well and got a bunch of good, solid laughs and I felt like I could handle any situation in life.

Man, if I can do stand-up, I can do ANYTHING!

I did my little ten-minute act. I didn't get booed off the stage and no one threw rotten tomatoes at me and no one heckled me or yelled at me. I went up there and I did what I was supposed to do and I didn't suck. That was the main thing: as long as I didn't suck, I was a success. I suppose preparing for all those hours and spending all that time memorizing all that stuff probably had an influence on how good my act was. Maybe that was the key. Maybe I just needed to work hard at it and then it would get better! What a concept.

A couple months later, I met this girl who was a stand-up comic at one of my 12-step meetings. She shared about being a stand-up comic and that she had her very own show every Wednesday night. I came up to her after the meeting and told her that I was a closet case stand-up comic and was wondering if she would let me audition for her show. She laughed and said that I was funny and that I passed the test already. Little did I know what kind of show I was getting myself into.

It turns out that she had a show at Lucy's Laundromat on Sunset Blvd. in Silverlake (just east of Hollywood). It's sort of a hipster part of town. My friend calls it Sliverflake, not sure why

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though...! Anyway, so I guess it really was in a laundromat. So, I go to Lucy's Laundromat and there is the girl from the meeting with a little microphone set up right in front of the unisex bathroom. It was actually a pretty fancy Laundromat because it had a Subway and a Starbucks built into the place. So, she must have made a deal with the Laundromat somehow to let her do a little one hour show to entertain the Laundry people and the Subway eaters and Starbucks drinkers. It was actually pretty cool.

There were about 9 or 10 other would-be stand-up comics there and we had our little area and some chairs lined up to accommodate maybe 15 people. It was the big time man! I had arrived. I had a regular gig doing stand-up comedy every Wednesday where I could work on my CRAFT. Life couldn't be better. One of the guys in our group would just get up there and make funny sounds, like from a penny whistle; the little plastic wind instrument in grade school that has a slider thing on it that goes up and down in pitch. He thought that was pretty clever, to make funny sounds. I laughed, for the first ten seconds. Then it got old FAST. There were some other comics that were pretty funny though. I have to admit that a few of them were seasoned pro's. Not me. I may be a lot of things, but a seasoned professional stand-up comic I ain't. But, it was worth a try. For a while, that is...

So, now it's my turn and I get up there, on the mic, in front of about 8 people and a few straggler Laundromat people. Watching, and waiting to be entertained, by me, Cliff Brodsky. The Professional Stand-Up Comic. That's how I wanted to be introduced. Keep in mind that perception is 9/10's of reality; if those people think I think that I'm funny, then at least I have a CHANCE of making them laugh. The problem is, that I didn't know any jokes. I knew a lot of other peoples jokes, and I could recite entire George Carlin and Bill Cosby and Monty Python records from front to back. But I had no jokes. What I did have, were funny stories. That was going to be my angle. I would pretend to tell jokes and really just tell wacky stories that SEEMED like jokes if you didn't know me, because they were such bizarre stories. Unfortunately for me, the first thing I would say once I got up there was a confession that I wasn't really a stand-up comic and that I only knew strange true stories (which no one believed me, because they thought I was a comic pretending to not know what I was doing)...which actually worked pretty well as a formula. I bet a LOT of comics do that, just pretend to be crazy (when in reality they are NOT pretending), but we, the stupid audience think they are genius's. Who know's really what comedy audiences are thinking about. Probably the same thing as other audiences: when am I going to get laid and is there any food around. It pretty much comes down to those TWO THINGS. Not much has changed in the past million years for us humans, sad to admit.

Long story short: I get up there and do my usual bits about getting yelled at as a rock n roll roadie and how I gave the finger to communist Germans going through check point Charlie back in '89 and how I smuggled weed into Berlin from Amsterdam and how I got fired from the tour manager...you know...funny story material. I got a bunch of laughs, not really because of my genius story telling, but probably because I am a little bit funny when I get nervous and try to remember TRUE stories that everyone in the audience thinks I WROTE. While I was doing my stand-up act, I noticed that there was blood on the floor right in front of me and I stopped my act and pointed out that there was real blood on the floor and what the hell kind of Laundromat was this! Laugh laugh laugh...tee hee hee...they thought I was SO funny. I wasn't telling a joke, I was merely pointing out that someone must have gotten stabbed recently and that this was a pretty tough Laundromat.

I only went back one more time at Lucy's Laundromat, because I could see that I wasn't really going to get anywhere in my stand-up career. At some point, I'm just going to have to get over my fear of public speaking and go do a real open mic night somewhere in Hollywood and just go for it.

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I actually have written a few jokes lately. I only have three jokes right now. One of them goes like this: "what if there was a band called The Mexican Beatles, they would be Juan, Raul, Gorge (pronounced "whore hey"), and Gringo!" I know, not that funny.

I also have a bit that I want to do someday. What if Elvis Presley was still alive and that he went to AA meetings; what would his name be? Twelvis Stepley! I could do a rock n roll impression of Twelvis Stepley singing about drugs and alcohol and sobriety. Maybe that would be funny. Who knows.

I always said when I was a kid that I wanted to do the hardest thing I could think of. I wanted to do the most difficult and challenging thing. Nuclear Physicist...too easy. Ivy League Professor...nope. President of the United States...wouldn't take that job if you paid me a million dollars. To me, it takes real courage and I mean REAL courage to get up there and try to make people laugh, as a profession, with your own hand written jokes.

Marines, Navy Seals, Mafia, Hit Men...most people think those people have a lot of courage. Maybe they do and maybe they don't. To me, being a stand-up comedian is the scariest possible job I can think of right now.

We should all have a moment of silence for the unsung stand-up comic.

They are the REAL heroes in life.