

BACK STAGE/WEST  
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## ***First-Class or Couch Shopping for Comedy Training***

By Steve North

If you're thinking of "getting into comedy" these days, one thing you'll notice is the confusing array of workshops and classes offered. This article is designed to give you a "map" of what you should be looking for, what questions to ask, and how to decide on the fastest route to your goals.

Unfortunately, too many of the classes have become mills that hand you the super-duper six-week "diploma," give you one performance in front of your friends, and then throw you out to "open-mike nights" (read: the wolves). That approach is like handing a guy a knife, then telling him to go out and do brain surgery.

Some of these classes churn out graduates who leave with a bundle of unconnected jokes, but with no clue how to perform an act. Jokes are fine. But you are no more a comedian for having jokes than you are a singer for having notes.

If a class doesn't focus on what I call your "comedic character" (some call it "persona"), then you will be well on your way to becoming one of thousands of run-of-the-mill jokesters who would probably get just as big a laugh if they wrote their material on a piece of paper and passed it around. Writing jokes without your comedic character is like buying a bunch of furniture before you look at a house.

Notice how many successful comedians have this ongoing character or theme. Two simple examples: You can always count on Rodney Dangerfield to be unsuccessfully seeking respect. You are certain that whatever Richard Lewis is talking about, he will be in a ridiculous amount of pain. The examples go on and on among successful comedians.

I define a comic as someone who says funny things. I define a comedian as someone who is a funny person. Comics get road dates (if they're lucky). Comedians get them, too, but they also get sitcoms and movies. After all, how does a casting person know how to cast you if you just stampede them with a herd of jokes?

Think of your favorite comedian. Chances are you'll remember a feeling of who he or she is more vividly than a particular joke.

So, back to school.

**CLASS ACTS** Classes in Los Angeles run from about \$120 to over \$300, and last from four to eight weeks. Most feature a performance at the end of each class session.

Understand this: Every one has something to teach. On the other hand, why go through Pittsburgh to get to San Francisco from L.A.? Your time, money, and resources are precious.

Here are my own suggestions based on fifteen years of coaching everyone from professionals to beginners:

First decide if you want a class or a private coach. A good private coach can get you there extremely fast, especially if regular performances are a part of the program. A class offers group support, a feeling of belonging, and peers to share your first experience with. In groups you may also learn from watching others.

These are the questions you should ask before committing to a coach or class:

-- Does the instructor actually help write material for you based on your ideas, or are you sent home to write your own, and then critiqued? "Critiquing" assignments is common among teachers who don't know how to do it, but "know it when they see it." We all love to be critics, but you have a right to be taught in class how to turn an idea into an actual piece of material.

-- Does the teacher know how to direct you into your comedic character on stage? Does he offer techniques such as "points of concentration" or other workshop "games" to discover your character? If they say your character or persona is something you just stumble upon, or are born with, or that it can't be taught, I have a bridge I want to sell you.

-- Is there a structure for learning and advancement beyond the first session and performance? Are there beginning, intermediate, and advanced groups? The instructor should offer continuing outlets that match your progress. Find out how long students stay with a class or instructor. If it's one session and goodbye, then you've most likely found a mill that's just selling the name on the front door.

-- Is the teacher a performer? This isn't math, folks, and anyone who tells you he can teach you something he's never really done in the arena - well, take a wild guess. Only performers really know the process that happens on stage. Directors, business people, and critics can only say whether they like it or not; they can't tell you how to make it better. You need a place to learn and grow and make mistakes.

The most important thing is, of course, your goals. If you just want to have a fling at it, meet some nice people, and do one show to get a good adrenaline rush in front of your friends, then disregard everything above.

Otherwise, ask the right questions.