

THE STAR
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COMEDY 101

By Karin Grennan
Staff Writer

Four men sat with notebooks in their laps and tape recorders by their side in a stark white classroom in Chatsworth. One by one, they stood to face their peers and teachers and read their work.

"You're probably wondering what the bouncer is doing up here," a hefty David Lerner of Reseda began. "Actually, I'm not feeling, too well. I'm just getting over a bout with bulimia. You should see me when I don't throw UP."

"OK, how many of you are looking at my nose?" a stoic Lou Di Fonzo, of West Hills asked dryly. "This is nothing. You should see it when I lie. Sometimes I think I look like an anteater."

Steve and Barb North paced the back of the classroom like expectant fathers. They interrupted the routines every few seconds to point out weak spots and bad timing. They dished out advice: Don't smile. Act more defensive. Toss that Kato Kaelin joke.

"I feel like a midwife. I'm bringing comedy babies into the world," Steve said.

Breaking into stand-up comedy often means jumping on stage during an open-mike night at a club. The Norths and other comic counselors present an academic alternative. They offer popular classes at the Learning Tree University in Chatsworth and through the extension program at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Chris Pippins, a stand-up comedian from Northridge who performs at the Comedy Store and Laugh Factory in Los Angeles, swears by classes. He bombed at several open mikes and talent shows before taking his first course from the Norths three years ago.

"They helped me to learn to set up jokes, different formulas, and to find what was truly funny in my life," Pippins said.

Classes also can connect you with comedians who can help you get gigs, Pippins said. "You're a business. You must invest in yourself."

Jodie Geller of Calabasas said the Norths helped her show her true self on stage. She took the Learning Tree class in July, participates in the Norths' weekly workshop, takes private lessons from Steve and performs with their Standup, Repertory Company. Together they've developed her comedic character, a hostile New Yorker.

"It is me at my most comfortable state," said Geller, 26. "When I meet people I try to be

nice and sweet so people like me. When I hang out with a friend, I'm like, 'Look at that chick over there and check out what she's wearing.'

Steve, 49, and Barb, 47, got their start by forming an improvisational group in Colorado 21 years ago. The Woodland Hills couple got a slot at the Improv two years later.

Since then, the Norths have performed on, written for or produced more than 30 television shows, including the "Newlywed Game" and the second "Gong Show." They have coached more than 500 comedians and actors as private tutors, television staff and class teachers.

Five years ago, the Norths developed a teaching style around the idea of comedic character. They noticed that people who just rattled off jokes were fading from the limelight, while those with stage personas had staying power.

A comic says funny things. A comedian is a funny person," Steve said. "If you think of your favorite comedian, most likely it's not a joke that comes to mind, but rather a feeling about their personality or attitude."

Steve said the ability to make friends laugh over lunch doesn't translate into stand-up success. Your friends know you, the audience doesn't. When performing, you need to quickly assume a strong character that makes your jokes work.

The Norths said a comedic character, but not necessarily a successful comedian, lurks in each of us. "I haven't found anybody that we couldn't get up on a stage for three minutes and be funny," Steve said.

During the first session of the Norths' last Learning Tree course, the couple directed the four students to list traits they or others would like to change about themselves. For Lerner, a 25-year-old sports memorabilia distributor, one attribute was his weight. Di Fonzo, a 57-year-old refrigerator repairman, noted his nose. Patrick Kanehann, a 28-year-old movie and television production assistant from Malibu, began with his lack of muscles.

"There is only one comedic character, because the comedic character is the part of you that is true and believable that we try to distort," Steve said. "He is an exaggeration of a part of you."

The first, and hardest step, is getting students to let go of their ego and commit their comedic character! "It is very scary with some people" Steve said. "The ego does not want to show a bunch of strangers what's dysfunctional. They want to be intelligent and to impress."

Edward Fajardo is a deep-voiced waiter from Woodland Hills who tells jokes to his customers. Fajardo, 37, began taking comedy classes because he thinks he is funnier than the comedians he sees on television. Four months ago Fajardo took a course through

UCLA's extension program. He did well when the class performed at a West Los Angeles club, but bombed when he returned to the venue to audition. He started looking for another approach to comedy and found the Norths.

Fajardo filled his first run-through at the Learning Tree with jabs at crazy drivers and stupid people. Steve directed Fajardo to turn it around and make his character the unreasonable one, a scatterbrained guy who drives like a maniac and can't understand why others complain about him.

"You're nice looking. You're tall. You have a nice physique. Steve, said, "You have to very quickly create your emotional flaw. The audience has to feel superior to you. They will not laugh if they don't feel superior.

At each class, the comedians-in-training practiced their acts, and the Norths refined them. The men spent the rest of the week memorizing their routines. By the last session, two days before their performance, nerves were fragile. "I'm scared to death," said Kanehahn, the production assistant.

Fajardo, the waiter, had memorized his act. But when he ran through it, Steve altered punch lines and transitions, and Fajardo started making mistakes. "With the little changes, it is causing me to forget," he said, exasperated. "It's all in the garbage now.

During the break, Fajardo was still shaken. "We practice and we do it and they rip it apart," he said.

Outside the class's earshot, Steve explained his approach. "Confidence really hurts you. We need that little bit of insecurity and fear.

The students arrived at the LA Connection Comedy Theatre in Sherman Oaks an hour before showtime, April 20. Forty people, mostly relatives and friends, filed into the small auditorium to see the routines, which were mixed into "Thursday Nite Live!" a weekly show by the Norths' Standup Repertory Company.

Everyone except Lerner (the one with the bulimia joke) admitted they were nervous. Lerner felt inspired. At 2 that morning, he had finished a "Seinfeld" script he plans to submit. "I've been looking forward to this for 22 years. I'm feeling really confident and cocky. I have no fear at all," he said, minutes before cracking open a Blueridge Porter beer.

Kanehann and Fajarqo made a couple of mistakes, but they got through their acts, and people laughed. Di Fonzo, who couldn't remember his act two days earlier, delivered his lines well.

Lerner stopped cold two minutes into his act. He was so thrilled the audience was laughing that he smiled - and lost his place. For 20 seconds, he glanced back and forth between the audience and the floor and giggled a little. Suddenly, he jumped back into

his routine and skated through the rest of it.

When the curtain closed, all the rookies vowed to return to the stage.

"We enjoyed every minute of it," Kanehann said. "I'm addicted now. That's it. There's no turning back."