

DRAKE WITHAM BIOGRAPHY

Drake Witham says, "Don't quit your day job. Get fired." If only he had followed his own advice when he followed his dream of stand-up comedy, he could've collected unemployment for a couple of months.

Had he stayed on as reporter, his dead-on impressions of his editors or his sharp tongue probably would've got him canned soon enough.

"Once I heard a boss say, 'I'm just thinking out loud' and I said 'that's called talking.' I'm pretty sure he wanted to fire me...out loud."

But Witham left on his own terms pursuing comedy in LA.

"Which means I became a temp. There's nothing more empowering than being paid to NOT care."

For one of the few times ever, this temp career was temporary. Within two years of starting stand-up he won the prestigious Seattle International Comedy Competition.

The ability to point out the inane with the attitude that none of us have to put up with it and a dead-pan delivery gets him work at clubs, corporate events, cruise ships, and private parties across the country and around the world. Clubs owners love his smart, clean material. Audiences love that he makes fun of himself. Pointing to his head he asks "does this strike anyone as a SUPERcut?"

The industry has taken notice. With only four years of leaving journalism behind Drake has appeared regularly on television. You may have seen him on Comedy Central's Live at Gotham or on one of his several appearances on the Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson. He's also appeared on Byron Allen's comedy.tv and has performed for the troops in the Middle East and Europe. Witham's not planning on quitting comedy anytime soon and at this rate he's not likely to get fired.

Visit Drake at www.comedynorth.com/witham.htm



DRAKE WITHAM

AFTRA/SAG

BROOK FOREST ENTERTAINMENT

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(818) 347-5098
Info@comedynorth.com

Height: 6'0
Weight: 150
Eyes: Hazel
Hair: Brown

TELEVISION

Live at Gotham
Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson (Multiple Appearances)
Comedy.tv (Byron Allen's Stand up Show)

Comedy Central
CBS
Ent. Studios

FILM

Super Precinct
Stage Fright
The Messenger
Recollection
Before the Law

Dir. Bryan Erwin
Dir. Richard Carlos
Dir. Yadi Li
Dir. Pablo Torroella
Dir. Pablo Torroella

Batman
Gabriel
Fred
Victor
Man

THEATER

Love Letters to Mary Jane
Closer
The Deer Hunter

Mackenzie Theater
The Acting Center
The Acting Center

Instructor
Larry
Michael

INTERNET

Late Night in the Afternoon
Super Natural Junkyard
A Psychic, a Skeptic and Dog Named Courage
Bumps in the Night

Host
Investigator
Skeptic
Innkeeper

TRAINING

The Acting Center
Groundlings

character and scene study
improvisation

Los Angeles
Los Angeles

AWARDS

Winner of the Seattle International Comedy Competition
Finalist - Great American Comedy Festival honoring Johnny Carson

SKILLS

Stand-up comedy with performances across the US and more than 20 countries including Iraq.
Former news reporter. Team Jacob.



CREDITS

Comedy Central's Live at Gotham

The Late Late Show with
Craig Ferguson

Byron Allen's Comedy.TV

Winner Seattle International
Comedy Competition

Bob & Tom Show

Todd & Tyler Radio Empire

XM/Sirius radio

Two comedy tours in Iraq

DRAKE WITHAM.

BECAUSE YOU WANT SOMEONE WHO WORKS.

CORPORATE APPEARANCES

American Humane Society
Pepsi
Microsoft
The Dallas Morning News
Home Depot
Harley Davidson
Think or Swim~TD Ameritrade
Carnival Cruise Lines
Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines
Blinding Light Design
Stine Seed
DNA Studio

~Complete list available upon request~





“If you’re looking for a fresh, new approach to comedy, Drake Witham just might be the answer.”

~CAMPUS ACTIVITIES
MAGAZINE

“Exactly what we needed. It was hilarious, clean and he tailored his act to our crowd.”

~MICROSOFT

“Best Comedy Show I’ve ever seen.”

~HOME DEPOT

WHAT THEY’RE SAYING

“I hired Drake to entertain 60 foreign exchange students, who as it turns out, didn’t speak much English but he had them howling for the entire hour.”

~UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO

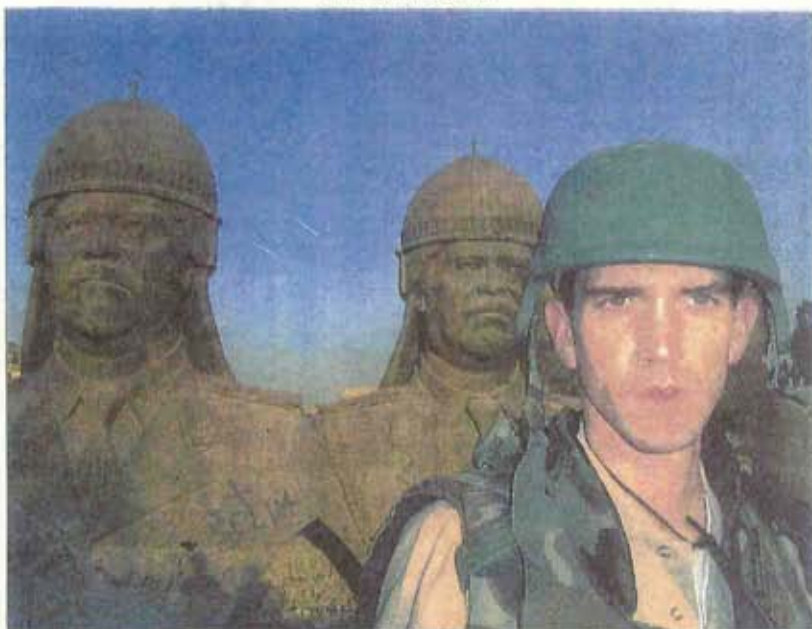
“Drake made a huge difference at our winter auction. Great material and he tied everything together and kept everyone laughing throughout. Not easy with our group.”

~DNA STUDIO

“Drake’s show was awesome!”

~STINE SEED





Photos by DRAKE WITHAM

Comic Drake Witham stands near busts of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad. He says the comedy tour was in the Bob Hope tradition.

Comic relief

Stand-up tour of Iraq is no joke for boosting troop morale

Drake Witham, a stand-up comic and former Dallas Morning News staff writer, recently entertained U.S. troops in Iraq with *Comics on Duty* and filed several dispatches. Here's his wrap-up report.

We brought jokes to a war. Seriously.

Amid the soldiers carrying M-16 rifles, the explosions and whirring helicopters in Iraq are picturesque buildings — torn apart and scarred by perfectly circular holes left by Tomahawk missiles. Reports come in daily about car bombs and helicopter battles.

But not everything has the feel of war, including the jokes four comedians and I provided on a recent *Comics on Duty* tour. Souvenirs at the gift shops on each base include Iraqi Most Wanted playing cards. One of the more popular T-shirts reads in both English and Arabic, "Who's Your Baghdadly?"

When I saw that one I thought, "We're too late — this area has already been taken over by bad jokes."

Stand-up comics Danny Bevin, Curtis Fortier, Jim Labriola, Nathan Timmel and I spent a week in Iraq, performing 13 shows in seven days at bases all over the country. We strapped on helmets and flak jackets and traveled to shows in Hattveet and Blach Hawk helicopters.

We performed in tents, on flatbed trucks and in one of Saddam's palaces, just a few rooms from a section left sagging by missiles. Repeated explosions during one show caused me to jump — and made the soldiers laugh because

On DallasNews.com

Read Drake Witham's earlier dispatches.

they knew the blasts weren't incoming fire.

There's a surreal quality to performing in bombed-out buildings for soldiers who may soon be firing the M-16s they've carried in.

No, we didn't find any weapons of mass destruction and were asked not to make jokes about them. But we saw what looked, to our untrained eyes, like mass destruction.

In Baghdad, Command Sgt. Maj. Donald Pelt said his 9th Cavalry Infantry Task Force needed a boost because grenades had recently injured two soldiers and one would lose both legs.

The soldiers deal with the reality of death with a simple, "If it happens, it happens." Then it's the job of officers to raise morale, and that's where we came in.

The troops responded best to Mr. Bevin, who drew heavily on his four years in the Army for material. He got raucous responses when he talked about the military axiom: "Hurry up and wait," and how being in the military gave him a cigarette habit.

"Smoke 'em if you got 'em," Mr. Bevin said, taking on the character of an officer. "The rest of you



Comics on Duty team members included (from left) Drake Witham, Danny Bevin, Nathan Timmel, Curtis Fortier and Jim Labriola.

come with me." Mr. Bevin said smoking had to be better than whatever the rest of the platoon was doing.

The rest of us found the troops wanted to hear about life in America. My jokes about being a temp to support myself struck a chord because many said they consider themselves temps. The only liquor on base is smuggled in but non-alcoholic beer is everywhere, so jokes about being a nonalcoholic got laughs, too.

After the shows, we signed autographs. Soldiers filed by, thanking us for making them laugh for the first time in months.

I never felt unsafe there, but every attack I'd read about seemed random enough that I kept my helmet and body armor on long after they told us it was OK to remove them.

My family wasn't happy about the trip at first and one relative

even offered me the money I was making not to go. But I looked at it as a chance to give something to the men and women risking their lives, following in the tradition of greats such as Bob Hope.

Some American contractors are taking the risk in Iraq, too. Bobby Johnson of Houston was our bus driver at Camp Anacorda in Balad. With three children, no job and considerable debt, he jumped at the chance to make big money in one of the most dangerous places in the world.

He had trouble sleeping when he first arrived in March because of the constant gunfire, and he's had friends die after diving over mines.

But he's adopted the same attitude as the soldiers. As he dropped us off at the airfield, he said, "If it happens, it happens."

E-mail: drwitham@rocketmail.com



Mr. Witham performs for troops at Camp Tawqadum near Fallujah.

COMICS' TOUR OF DUTY



- 1 Week, 13 shows**
- Aug. 27 Camp Peltat, Ruweil
 - Aug. 28 Camp Victory, Baghdad
 - Aug. 29 Camp Honor, Baghdad
 - Camp Tegen, Baghdad
 - Camp Highlander, Baghdad
 - Aug. 30 Camp Headquarters, Baghdad
 - Camp Cooke, Al Taj
 - Camp Cooke, Al Taj
 - Aug. 31 Camp Tawqadum, near Fallujah
 - Camp Tawqadum, near Fallujah
 - Sept. 1 Camp Tawqadum, near Fallujah
 - Sept. 2 Camp Anacorda, Balad
 - Camp Anacorda, Balad

CENTHIA NIEREKOS/Staff Artist



If You Are Looking For A Fresh, New Approach To Comedy, Drake Witham Just Might Be The Answer

Every comedian has bombed and nearly all of them have been heckled. Drake Witham may be the only one who was ever heckled by a bomb.

The terrifying experience took place while Witham was doing his first comedy tour in Iraq.

"I was just about to deliver a punch line when an explosion in the distance shook the whole stage," Witham recalled. "I'm a pretty calm, collected guy so I immediately ...panicked. The crowd went crazy. They were completely used to the explosions but they loved watching comedy boy flail around."

It turns out that the explosion was just a test being run on the base but the incident was one of many highlights, including performing in Saddam's palaces, during the ten-day tour through the war zone with Comics on Duty.

"Regardless of how you feel about it, there are guys putting their asses on the line, scared, tired, angry and desperately in need of a laugh," Witham said. "Afterwards they'd say things like 'thanks, I haven't laughed in six months.'"

He counts the tour of Iraq as one of his most rewarding experiences since leaving a promising journalism career for comedy four years ago.

Barely a year into his new career he won the prestigious Seattle International Comedy Competition, impressing Ron Reid, who's been running the competition for 15 of its 26 years.

"We have talented, hilarious people enter every year," Reid said. "So we were a little surprised when this kid that no one had heard of, came in and blew us away."

The win brought Witham work in the country's finest comedy clubs and attention from television executives.



Now barely four years after covering murders and mayhem for the *Dallas Morning News*, Witham is doing a little killing of his own on national television. He makes his television debut this month on Comedy Central's landmark series "Live at Gotham."

"That was a thrill," Witham said of the taping at the New York City club. "The lights are hot and I was aware of all the cameras but I wasn't nervous at all. I felt very calm, not like I'd made it yet but like I belong."

The show, which has been drawing rave reviews, is the comedy network's first to combine webcasting with television. Each comedian was required to perform three minutes of current events material which was broadcast on the comedy central website the day after the taping. The rest of Witham's performance will be televised on August 25.

"The current events stuff was tough for some comics in the audition but my reporting background helped me pick through the news and find the funny," Witham said.

Living in Los Angeles, Witham performs regularly at the Hollywood Improv, The Ice House in Pasadena and the Comedy and Magic Club in Hermosa Beach. These are the clubs where established comics try their stuff and Witham has performed with "Seinfeld's" Michael Richards, Sarah Silverman, Patton Oswalt, Norm MacDonald and Gary Shandling to name a few.

A graduate of the University of Washington, where he also served as editor of the student paper, Witham went into journalism, breaking stories, winning awards and trying to figure out how to do what he wanted to do: stand-up comedy. That meant giving up his career and working as a temp for a couple of years until comedy started paying the bills.

If he had a chance to do it all over again, Witham would have spent more time in college.

"Six years as it turns out, wasn't enough," Witham said. "Maybe I should have squeezed in a few more of those classes where they teach you to make money and smart career decisions."

Now he's getting into the college market, having performed at several California schools, including UCLA's commencement.

"They love my temp material because the job market is so uncertain when you first get out of school," he said.

For now, he's planning a September return to Iraq. He's ready for any sort of heckling.

Showcase

Friday's Showcase
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■ Music for the Masses
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dede.read@avpress.com

Antelope Valley Press

Ex-reporter finds success in comedy

Winner of 2003 Seattle International Comedy Competition to perform at Schooners tonight

By DEDE READ
Showcase Editor

Before Drake Witham became a full-time stand-up comedian two years ago, he was a journalist, whose job was no laughing matter.

"I was working night cops in Dallas for about three years, covering murder and mayhem," he explained during a recent telephone interview from Dulles airport in Washington, D.C.

He still writes on occasion for the newspaper.

"They called me last month and they wanted me to do a story on the HIV scare in the porn industry," he said. "That was exciting. I don't know anybody in that world. You're just starting at zero and you have to figure out how to put together a story. So that was fun."

But he doesn't miss the mayhem.

"I don't miss going out to car accidents and going up to people's doors and asking them for pictures of family members that just died," he explained. "I was good at that and was respectful and got good stories out of it, but I don't miss that part of the day."

Witham, who will perform tonight at Schooners in Lancaster, decided to give stand-up his full attention two years ago after performing at his company Christmas party.

"... They wanted me to do stand-up and I ended up just doing impressions of my editors," he said. "There were about 200 people in the room and it went really well, except for the one editor that got a little upset. I wasn't being mean or anything, it's just, I think it was just a little too accurate for her."

It wasn't long before Witham decided to pick up and move "out to Los Angeles because that's what you do, right? You go out there, they put you on a show and you make a bunch of money ..."

"Of course, I found out in the first 24 hours that's not how it works. I just started hitting open mikes and did shows whenever I could."

On stage, Witham, who won the 2003 Seattle International Comedy Competition, talks about family and about his experiences on the job.

"I grew up in a family with an Irish-Catholic mother and three brothers," he said. "There was always something going on."

Witham's mom did some acting when she was young. That's how she met his dad, who was a drama professor.

"I was always kind of competing in the kitchen with my mother for stage time," he remembered. "It was chaotic and it was fun. She would do voices all the time, she's a very funny woman. I got a lot

from her."

His parents divorced when he was still very young, "but I think I got a little bit (of my comedic ability) from both of them."

Witham also uses his Navy SEAL brother in his act.

"I talk about him a lot," he said. "We're brothers, but we're very different. He's a short and stocky guy, a weightlifter. And I'm as thin as a rail."

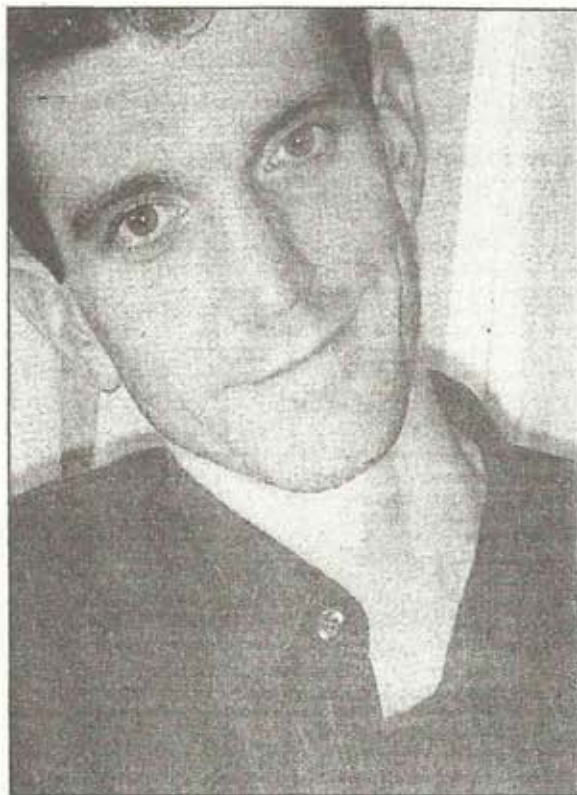
While he wouldn't turn down TV or movie gigs, Witham is focused on his stand-up act.

"Right now I'm concentrating on getting to that headlining level," he said. "You can make more money and work more consistently. I'm at a point where I'm booking everything myself. I can get a little mileage with the Seattle contest, but most of the winners of that contest have become former winners of that contest. There's no guarantees or set paths. A lot of it is exciting. But it can be frustrating too."

"There are times that I look at the money I was making and the debt I have now. I just wasn't happy doing what I was doing. I think a lot of (stand-up) is just hanging on as long as you can and just getting better and better."

For reservations or details about Schooners Comedy Night, call (661) 940-7028.

dedered@avpress.com



COMEDY NIGHT — Stand-up comedian Drake Witham is scheduled to perform tonight at Schooners in Lancaster. Witham won the Seattle International Comedy Competition in 2003.

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MUSIC

Former P-I intern wins comedy competition

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER STAFF

Drake Witham, an intern at the Post-Intelligencer in the mid-'90s, has won the 24th annual Seattle International Comedy Competition.

Witham, currently a Los Angeles resident, won the top prize of \$3,000 at the final show of the monthlong competition Monday night at the Muckleshoot Casino in Auburn. Known for his dry, somewhat sarcastic delivery, Witham focused on life as a temporary worker.

Kevin Williams of Chicago won second place, followed by Patrick Maliha of Vancouver, B.C., in third place, Paul Bae, also of Vancouver, in fourth place, and Tommy Savitt of L.A. in fifth place.

Witham, the son of University of Washington drama professor Barry Witham, also worked at the Dallas Morning News and the Providence (R.I.) Journal and served as editor of the UW Daily. At the Dallas paper, Witham entertained co-workers at a staff Christmas party by doing impressions of some of the editors.

As part of his winnings, Witham will appear at the Comedy Underground tomorrow through Saturday. Tickets, \$6-\$12, are available at Ticketmaster or through www.comedyunderground.com.

Webtowns

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Perspectives



Finding the Funny

It's one thing for a stand-up comedian to bomb on stage. It's quite another to hear actual bombs exploding while on stage. Drake Witham ('96) has experienced both.

Witham, who earned a B.A. from the UW in communication and political science, was touring Iraq with Comics on Duty—a group that sends comedians to military bases to entertain U.S. troops—when a bomb exploded near the army base where he was performing. Although Witham was a bit shaken, he continued his stand-up routine, earning rousing applause from the soldiers.

A few years earlier, reporting on the troops would have seemed more likely than entertaining them.

"I always wanted to be a journalist," says Witham, son of Barry Witham, UW professor of drama. When Drake arrived at the UW as a freshman, he joined the staff of *The Daily*, the UW student newspaper. He later served as editor. "I was at *The Daily* all the time," Witham recalls. "I would drop courses to spend more time there."

After graduating and completing several newspaper internships, including one with the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, Witham took a job at the *Providence Journal* in Rhode Island. That's when he first attended open mic night at a club in Boston. Watching other amateurs perform stand-up comedy, he decided to give it a try.

"You see people just dying during their five minutes on stage," recalls Witham. "I thought, 'I can do that.' Most of it is having the guts to get up and fail. Because you do fail most of the time."

The first time Witham got on stage, he was a hit. But his success was short-lived. The next few times, he struggled to get a response from the audience. "It's like the audience

can sense it when you're on stage for the first time," he says, "and they give you a free pass. After that you're on your own."

After two years in Rhode Island and numerous visits to open mic night in Boston, Witham took a job at the *Dallas Morning News*, where he was assigned to the night police beat. "I spent two years covering murder and mayhem," Witham recalls. "Any time I'd talk to somebody for a story, it was the worst day of their life. It was the opposite of stand-up comedy."

Although there was no place for comedy in his newspaper reporting, the *Dallas Morning News* did, in a sense, launch Witham's comedy career. Colleagues at the paper knew that he had some stand-up experience and asked him to perform at an office Christmas party. With about 200 reporters, editors, and other staff in attendance, Witham spun jokes about the paper and did impressions of the editors. "I did great," Witham recalls. "I killed. After that, I decided to plan my escape. I decided that stand-up was what I wanted to do."

Witham moved to Los Angeles immediately. He soon discovered that "a few other people had the same idea." He crawled his way up the comedy ladder, taking jobs that still make him cringe. Particularly memorable was the gig in a laundromat, where "there were 40 people in the room, only half of them spoke English, and no one was laughing." Still,

The beauty and challenge of stand-up comedy is that "even if you do the same material, the show is different every time," says Drake Witham.



Through the group Comics on Duty, Drake Witham has made two trips to Iraq to perform for U.S. troops.

says Witham, even awful jobs provide an opportunity to perform. "There's only one way to do comedy, and that's to practice in front of people," he says.

All that practice paid off. A year after committing to a comedy career, Witham competed in—and won—the Seattle Comedy Competition in 2003. "I was so new at the time that I didn't really know what I was doing," he admits. "In the finals, I had to have 20 minutes of material. I didn't have 20 minutes of material. I had to fake my way through it."

Even with that early success, Witham says that only recently has he become comfortable enough to make eye contact with audience members. "To look at somebody while on stage, that was an uncomfortable thing for me," he says. "Now that I'm more experienced, I'm able to treat it as a conversation with multiple people."

Witham's resume includes appearances on Comedy Central's *Live at Gotham* and *The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson*. Yet even now some performances are more successful than others. That, says Witham, is the beauty and challenge of stand-up. "Even if you do the same material, the show is different every time," he says.

Some shows in Iraq have been really different. Witham, whose brother was

in the military from 1991 through 2002, wasn't sure what to expect when he signed on with Comics on Duty. His first Iraq trip was a ten-day tour with five other comedians, during which that bomb exploded nearby while he was on stage. Undaunted, Witham rejoined the comedy tour in 2006—one month after getting married—and spent a harrowing night in a Baghdad bunker with U.S. soldiers after mortar hit the army base's ammunition supply just as a comedy show ended. "We grabbed our helmets and headed for the bunker," says Witham. "The ammunition continued blowing up for hours. I thought, 'What am I doing here!'"

Witham toured with Comics on Duty again this year but skipped Baghdad, much to his wife's relief. He visited bases in Europe and the Mediterranean instead. And closer to home, he performed in the Northwest in September, including a gig at the Bumbershoot Festival in Seattle.

For the UW alumnus, performing in Seattle is always a treat. "I love it up here," he says. "The crowds are smarter. It's here that I won the comedy competition when I was so new to comedy. Seattle has been good to me." ♦

diversions

INSIDE: Movies B5 / Calendar B6, B7

Comedy clash

It's better than working the crowd at the Laundromat

By Andrea Garcia
DAILY REPUBLIC

VACAVILLE — The slim, Jewish comedian doesn't mind embracing his culture. In fact, he's made a rapping remix of "Hava Nagila."

"I'm no stranger to bar mitzvahs. I started as a dee jay and came up with a lot of different remixes," said Eric Schwartz, first-place contestant in the San Francisco International Stand-Up Comedy Competition.

PREVIEW

'The San Francisco International Stand-Up Comedy Competition'

8 p.m. Oct. 4
Vacaville
Performing Arts
Theatre, 1010
Ulatis Drive
\$20
449-6217

ing Arts Theatre on Oct. 4.

The event marks its 28th year in comedy competition, with artists Robin Williams, Dana Carvey and Ellen DeGeneres as alumni contenders.

"Right now we have alumni on TV, such as Patton Oswald on "Kings of Queens," Doug Stanhope, co-host of "The Man Show" on Comedy Central and Wanda Sykes of "Wanda at Large," said Jon Fox, promoter of the San Francisco International Standup Comedy Competition. "Not all were winners . . . Wanda didn't make it to the finals."

Fox explains some comedians come into the competition early in their career and don't make it to the finals, but the San Francisco Comedy Competition is still proud of them, he said.

Previous experience in comedy is not necessary to be a comedian. Schwartz, for example, was a journalism major at Cal-Poly in San Luis Obispo before he changed his career to comedy.

"I just, you know, did shows at the campus pizza place and just started loving the comedy," Schwartz said. "I couldn't seriously report the news. If I did, it would have a funny twist to it, you know? If they had a rapping newscaster, then I'd do it."

A good portion of Schwartz's material is music-based, like rap, and combines world events into his act.

"Dubya is what they dubbed me, don't be a dummy; I'm bombing you for my gas, so I can fill my Hummie," Schwartz rapped from Los Angeles during a phone interview.

Apparently, journalism seems to be the foundation of comedy for some. Drake Witham, 31, who worked as a cops reporter for the Dallas Morning News, gave up the beat for a laugh.

'There was no audience, maybe about 40 people doing laundry, half of which spoke English. The mic was in front of the bathroom and you have to book ahead to get some time. They do it every week, it's comedy at a Laundromat. I never went back.'

— DRAKE WITHAM

"They (the newspaper) had a Christmas party one year and asked me to do a performance. I did impressions of the editors and people were like, 'oh no, you're going to get fired,'" said Witham of his start in comedy. "It went over really well, although one editor did cry. The impression was a little too accurate."

Finding his interest is making people laugh, Witham quit the paper, packed his bags and moved to Los Angeles where he became a "temp" worker to make ends meet.

"That's how I earn money, much to my

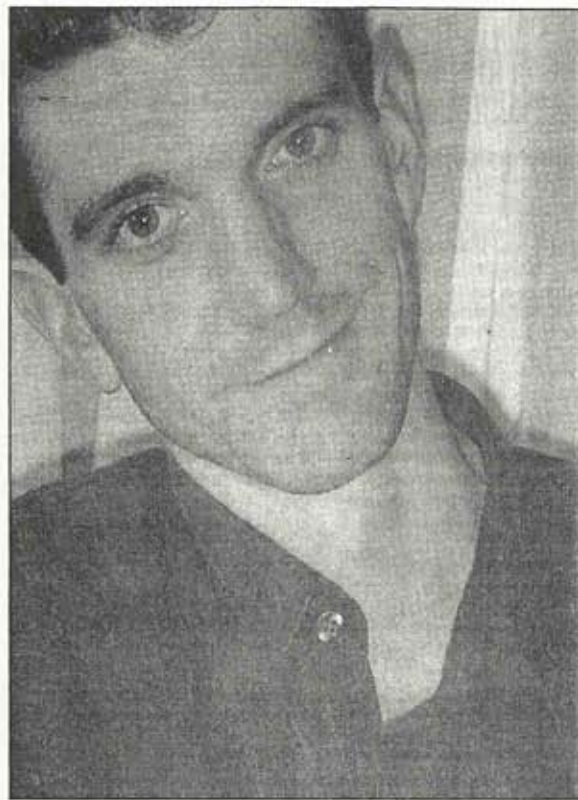
mother's delight," Witham said in jest. "I've done different things, like work in an insurance office, filing — which I'm quite good at, beauty products and customer service. It's been good as far as getting material for me."

Witham is so diversified, he even performed at a Laundromat in Los Angeles.

"There was no audience, maybe about 40 people doing laundry, half of which spoke English," Witham said. "The mic was in front of the bathroom and you have to book ahead to get some time. They do it every week, it's comedy at a Laundromat. I never went back."

As for contestants, hundreds of videotapes and live auditions are dwindled down to 30 competitors. They are then divided into two groups of 15, which perform over a six-night period. Five of each group are selected for the semi-finals to create a group of 10 competitors performing a 10-minute set. This year, Jim Short, comedian on Comedy Central and various comedy clubs, will be hosting the event in Vacaville.

Andrea Garcia can be reached at agarcia@dailyrepublic.net.



Features

SECTION C

www.kingcountyjournal.com

TELEVISION
PEOPLE
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OF EVENTS

LAUGHTER *in the midst of* WAR

Kirkland comic joins troupe of comedians to entertain troops in Iraq

By Doug Margeson
Journal Reporter

KIRKLAND — Thank you, thank you, ladies and gentlemen. It's great to be here tonight. And hey, what a terrific audience.

Terrific? Well, they are noticeably dirty and tired and every single one of them is carrying a trench knife and an M-16. And they are not smiling. Webster's definition of terrific, ("adj. In: exciting fear or awe") seems pretty apt.

So make them laugh. "Actually, they laughed a lot. And they were so appreciative. Probably the best crowds I ever worked."

So said Kirkland comedian Drake Witham, who recently returned from a week-long tour of entertaining troops in Iraq. Witham and a troupe of other standup comedians went there as part of the "Comics on Duty" program. Neither he nor his colleagues in the tour are top bananas — "We needed the money and the experience and they needed guys who would work cheap." — but the troops didn't seem to care.

"One sergeant told me his troops could really use a laugh because they lost two guys Friday. That got my attention."

So did a number of other things, including, one night, having his act interrupted by explosions. The troops, who are used to such things, knew the explosions were far away and ignored them. Witham knew no such thing and struggled to keep his composure. He decided he didn't like combat zones.

Reporter turns to standup

Witham has been doing standup on and off ever since he graduated from the University of Washington in 1996. A former reporter and editor on the University Daily, he got jobs with the Providence Journal and then the Dallas Morning News. While in Dallas,



Journal photo
Comedian Drake Witham recently returned from a weeklong gig entertaining American troops in Iraq.

he started entering open mike comedy competitions. The paper held a Christmas party. The organizers asked Witham to do impressions of some of the editors. He did and everybody laughed — everybody except the editors, that is.

"When I told them I was thinking about going into standup full-time, they didn't try to talk me out of it," Witham said.

So ever since, he has been doing what beginning comedians do: working gig after gig at clubs around the country and showing up at various comedy festivals. At one such festival in Boston, Comics on Duty organizer Rick Davis asked him if he would like to tour Iraq. When Witham's girlfriend heard about it, she said, "You said no, right?"

Wrong. He said yes, much to the consternation of his family, who offered him money to stay home.

"I felt it was my chance to do something," Witham said. "I have friends over there who keep getting extended and extended. Comedy gives people a release. And if ever there were people who need a little release, it's the guys in Iraq."

So over he went. He performed at a different venue every day, occasionally at two different venues a day. Sometimes the shows were in makeshift theaters, sometimes a tent, sometimes from the back of a flatbed truck.

Learning the laugh lines

He learned quickly what made the troops laugh. Part of his routines involve his experiences as a teetotaler. The troops get no booze. The closest they have is nonalcoholic beer, which was the source of one of Witham's most surefire jokes: "Hey, it's Friday night. Let's all go get bloated."

Other jokes that worked well involved Witham's experiences as a temp and part-timer at various crap jobs. Crap jobs are something the troops know all too well, Witham said.

Early in the tour, some of the other comedians tried Army jokes, which went over like lead balloons. Some tried combat jokes, which went over even worse, and a few even tried hostage jokes, which went over worst of

all. Some things in Iraq simply are not funny, Witham said.

He traveled in Iraq with military escorts, all of whom were armed. Witham was not. He doesn't know how to shoot a gun and, yes, he knows full well what happens to hostages. Fortunately, he went from American base to American base, which in itself proved an eye opener.

"When you are coming in on a helicopter and see how huge the bases are, you realize we are going to be there a long time," Witham said. "We are building democracy one trailer park at a time."

On those bases, the troops' worst problems are boredom and monotony, Witham found. They treat the

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