

“There are no rules - comedy is about *who you are*.” What if you don’t really know who you are, I ask, or you’re inclined to be many different things, dependent on mood and company? Chris is unfazed - just go with a sense of yourself that feels right at the time, and revel in it. Regardless of who you are, he explains, the same basic principles apply for everyone - and they’re both, at first glance at least, counterintuitive: 1) it’s not about finding things that are funny, and 2), it’s not about trying to make people laugh.

To clarify - 1) means you should just find any *thing* - stories, incidents, thoughts - anything at all, and find the funny in it. 2) means you absolutely mustn’t predicate your material on what you think people will want. Talk about what actually interests you, and then make that funny. People want the odd, real, believable you - emphasise these, and humour follows.

Just as this is beginning to sound a bit vague and self-helpy, Chris gets down to basics. Demonstrating each point by slipping in and out of a seamless sequence of comedic caricatures, he explains how to use the stage - coming right forward and leaning off the front gives a totally different feel to stalking and muttering at the back; sitting on the stool shifts the mood again to a more sedate, storyteller style. Some of his advice seems almost too obvious to be worth pointing out - like the golden rule to take the mic off the stand and move the stand out of the way as soon as you get on stage. It might seem a small thing - it’s only a thin black stick, after all - but Chris says if you think that, try taking one home and plonking it in front of your TV: “Sure, you can still see the TV - but that stick is still really annoying.” Though at the time most of us are thinking “there’s no way I’d do that anyway”, a late-comer who missed this advice proceeds to make every mistake listed - and his set is noticeably compromised as a result.

There are other simple tricks: the amazing difference in delivery when you angle the mic correctly - suddenly it becomes rounded and authoritative where before it was flat and underpowered. “Remember the mic is a sound toy,” says Chris. “It does much more than make your voice louder - it can turn it into a roar, throw a sinister whisper to the back of the room, pepper a story with sound effects.”

The real learning begins, of course, when we have to get up on stage and try it - taking it in turns to present the answers to questions we’d been sent in advance, before supportive group analysis and arrestingly insightful critique from Chris. There’s a tangible ‘moment of truth’ feeling in the air.

Thickset Sam goes first, a passionate, ranty kind of comic who launches a tirade at stand-up comedy itself. Then there’s Alex, a stocky, gently self-effacing Scouser with a few shows under his belt already. He’s pretty polished, having prepared his answers into a properly shaped set, with an ending that cunningly references the beginning and everything. We’re impressed. After each attempt, Chris



“THERE ARE NO RULES - COMEDY IS ABOUT WHO YOU ARE.” CHRIS MOLINEUX

highlights the physical tics or behavioural traps we ourselves are unaware of, gives a neat character assessment, identifies what worked and what didn’t, suggests subtle changes that would up the laughter hit-rate.

With nearly all of us, there’s a sudden transition from the relaxed person sat facing the stage to the wildly gesticulating, sentence-rushing caricature we all become once we’re on it. Odd that just stepping two feet forward and turning round has such a profound effect on behaviour. This, explains Chris, is because your mind’s taken up with what you’re saying and how it’s being received, so it forgets to monitor what your body’s up to. The answer is to pick an adjective that’ll describe your mannerisms - a kind of behavioural keyword to follow, and stick to it. “It could be ‘mischievous’, ‘suspicious’, ‘Hitlerian’, anything that suits the tone of your material.” You can use your posture to build a sense of character before you even get to the mic.

Naturally, not all the advice will work for everyone (“you’re not building a robot, you’re riding a horse”), but Chris reiterates simple techniques that work for most people, most of the time. Like setting up audience expectation with repetition of similar things in a similar tone, then shifting suddenly to surprise people. The sharper the shift, the better. Control of voice is another staple - what Chris calls ‘the Picard effect’ after Patrick Stewart’s imperious baritone. Identify the kind of voice that best suits you - and then practise with it, like practising the piano. “Record yourself,” says Chris. “Most people have no idea what they sound like to everyone else. Get to know that, and you can take control of it.”

Time and time again Chris identifies moments where we miss humour by simply not pushing it enough. “The joke is never finished just because you get to the punchline, you’ve always got to be thinking ‘if *that*, then *what else?*’ Always be looking where you can

take it next, what the extreme conclusion of things might be.”

The funniest person of the afternoon is the seemingly shy schoolboy, Will. He’s like a teenage Stephen Merchant, with a soft Bristolian burr and gentle, unaffected manner. There’s a story about needing a pee during a fire evacuation, one about burning oven chips in a microwave - nothing you’d repeat down the pub - but the boyish ingenuousness and wistful, unquestioning tone make it belly-laugh funny. He lets sentences fizzle out when he realises they’re not going anywhere; his concluding bow the merest shrug as he returns mic to stand. Just as I’m thinking “here’s a prime example of that supposedly mythical innate funniness”, Chris pinpoints the unthinking little tics and idiosyncrasies which made it funny: the establishment of a distinct personality-type; the combination of his unassuming appearance (his posture suggests acute shyness) with a such a nonchalant, assured delivery; the way the lines are left to linger or peter out with little more than an eye-roll to separate one anecdote from the next. It all seems so obvious when it’s pointed out.

And then it’s my turn. I’m generally happy enough in front of a crowd, and feel emboldened by Chris’s guidance, but somehow it all falls apart anyway. There’s something about the lights, the expectant eyes, the sheer weight of anticipation that short-circuits the brain. Although I’m not aware of it at the time, my shoulders hunch, my eyebrows fix into a strange, anxious frown and my intonation swoops and dips like a deranged newsreader. All this is relayed to me afterwards - but people do laugh in (some of) the right places at least - the highlights (apparently) being a confused monologue about urinal etiquette, and the bit about how baffling it is that some women who’ve experienced childbirth still believe in Intelligent Design. Chris even offers tentative encouragement: “You really could do... OK at this. You just need more stage time.” More stage time? Ulp. Still, never say never. Maybe there’s life in the old frog yet.

FFI: WWW.CHRISMOLINEUX.COM