

Stand-up Comedy: Origins, Development, Education, and Romanian Perspectives of a Comic Form

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Abstract: Humor is a very powerful weapon, it can change mentalities, induce ideas, propose new behaviors. The stand-up comedy phenomenon has taken a strong lead, it is enjoyed and consumed by a large and diverse audience. By briefly analyzing the genre, the history and emergence of the phenomenon and its development, in social and educational contexts, this paper tries to contribute to understanding the importance of producing quality comedy, avoiding not only the distortion of the artistic act, but also the decay of society. Some Romanian Perspectives of this comic form are also analyzed.

Keywords: Stand-up comedy, Diana Roșca, comedy studies, comedy, humor studies, humor, Romanian stand-up.

Stand-up comedy – artistic and social phenomenon

In recent years, stand-up comedy in Romania has enjoyed an overwhelming success with the public. Shows in stadiums, sold-out tickets for two performances in the same evening in large halls, hundreds of clubs, restaurants and bars that organize stand-up/open mic comedy shows, very popular television entertainment shows dedicated to the genre. Comedy has

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always had the power to change mentalities, to induce ideas. As strange as it may sound, laughter and humor are extremely serious themes that occupy a notable place in the economy of life. The long research of humor is justified, as it can provide clues about the way the human brain works, how it processes and interprets information, how it resolves conflicts or balances the inside of a person with the outside world. The current article that addresses stand-up comedy, the mode of manifestation and the history of the rise of the phenomenon is intended to be our first step on the mysterious, thrilling, challenging road of understanding the use of humor for the progress of humanity.

The definition of stand-up comedy

The term “stand-up comedy” appears for the first time in a dictionary in 1966 (Oxford English Dictionary and Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary)¹. Since then, this type of comedy has been recognized as a separate genre, under a certain name, but it appeared long before, without being particularized. There are many opinions regarding the birth of this kind of comedy. For example, Jim Mendrinis in the article “The First Stand Up” makes the following statement: “Stand-up is an American invention, whose roots can be found in the mid-1800s, until then comedy was the exclusive domain of the theater. The unintentional originator of stand-up comedy was Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy Rice”².

Oliver Double, an influential figure in the field of comedy studies in the UK, points out that the genre of stand-up comedy is a difficult one to define because “the boundaries are blurred”³. However, he finds a very simple definition: “A single performer who stands in front of an audience, talking to them with the intention of making them laugh”⁴. What he notes, however,

¹ Eddie Tafoya, *The Legacy of the Wisecrack: Stand-up Comedy as the Great American Literary Form*, Brown Walker Press, 31 March 2009, 210.

² <http://historyofcomedy.blogspot.ro/2004/12/first-stand-up.html>

³ Oliver Double, *Getting the joke: The inner workings of stand-up comedy* (London: Methuen Drama, 2005), 53.

⁴ Oliver Double, *Stand-Up! On Being a Comedian* (London: Methuen Drama, 1997), 4.

is the uniqueness of this type of performance, referring to the (very specific) role that the audience has in the production of the show.

The audience, the venue and, the comedian, all contribute to the making of the stand-up show. The experience of stand-up comedy is perceived as an extremely different experience from the theater show, but also from the exchange of jokes in a circle of friends. Speaking about the person who makes/produces comedy, in English, one distinguishes two terms: comedian and comic. The comedian is the person who performs a comedy text with the aim of making the audience laugh. This can be achieved by the performer through a role in a film, through a comedy-parody song, by participating in an improvisation show, etc. The comedian can be the host of an entertainment show, a TV or radio show. You can be considered a comedian by doing any kind of performance that produces laughter, including stand-up comedy. The comic, on the other hand, is that person who does stand-up comedy. A comic is a comedian, but a comedian is not necessarily a comic. Therefore, in the following, referring to the person who performs in stand-up comedy, we will use the term stand-up comedian.

The ancestors of stand-up comedy, the kinships, differences, fitting into a tradition

Although one could say that this art form is recent, its history could be quite rich. Looking at popular art forms, such as *commedia dell'arte*, circus and variety shows, one will discover techniques and tactics strikingly similar to those used in stand-up comedy. Gathering information from extremely valuable ancient writings about oratory and comedy (Aristotle, Cicero, Plato, Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, etc.), we came to the conclusion that the principles used in antiquity by orators, who, in their struggle to convince the crowds sometimes resorted to joke telling, are the basis of the principles by which stand-up comedy works. By paying a little attention we come to realize that some stand-up comedy shows today are an important part of modern intellectual and social life, being strongly involved in the processes of progressive social change. The state and institutional structures have always been afraid of comedy, often

trying to restrict it through numerous control mechanisms. (We have strong examples from Romania during Communism, when everything that was comedy presented to the general public was subject to censorship, whether it was presented through television, or in shows with an audience such as artistic brigade, music and humor shows/magazines, or contest festivals.) The changes that stand-up comedy wants to produce are changes in consciousness, in sensibilities, which could ultimately lead to material or institutional changes.

The minstrel of the Middle Ages and the jester of the king could be two noteworthy forerunners of today's comedians. The minstrel is a popular artist from France's Middle Ages, who sang and recited verses, accompanied by an instrument, narrating real or imaginary stories. Usually, they were frequently under the patronage of members of the royal houses and high society, but later, losing popularity, they began to wander the world, creating the tradition of traveling artists. Also in the Middle Ages, but even later, the "king's fool" or the royal jester, kept at courts to entertain the sovereign, was the only one who could interrupt him, contradict him, even make a monkey of him. He was authorized to mock everything, but also to speak truths that anyone else would not have dared to speak. In a royal court, full of conspiracies and intrigues, he aroused laughter with his jokes, grimaces and deeds, being able to say whatever he wanted, to the amusement and sometimes despair of those who could not do the same. Similarly, today's comedians bring to the audience taboo subjects, truths sometimes difficult to tackle in public, wrapped in the cloak of humor.

Looking for the closest ancestors of stand-up comedy, we arrive at the *commedia dell'arte* shows, a phenomenon that appeared in the 16th century. This type of show was intended to satisfy the tastes of a broad audience willing to be thoroughly amused by subjects about real-life people and situations. The representations were based around a repertoire of conventional situations, such as adultery, jealousy, senility, or love. The dialogue and action could easily be adjusted to satirize local scandals, current events, or regional antics. The *commedia dell'arte* audience was very receptive to the improvisational

manner of the old masks⁵. Stand-up comedy is based on the same principles. The comedians work on a skeleton (a series of jokes created by them), on which they improvise depending on the place of the event, the context in which it takes place, the wishes and knowledge of the audience.

Also, worth mentioning in this search is the Music Hall, the famous British theatrical entertainment popular in the early Victorian era. Around the 1850s, several private houses were transformed into venues with a stage, where spectators could consume alcohol, tobacco, and food during the performances. Business being profitable in the field, the owners began to demolish the old houses and build large performance halls in their places. This is how the well-known Music Halls appeared, with generous stages and increased capacity for tables and the public. The first and most famous Music Hall, built in 1852, after which all others were inspired, was called Canterbury Music Hall and was located in Lambeth, London. It operated for almost a century, being destroyed during a German bombing in 1942. Moments of entertainment were presented on the same stages by actors, singers, clowns, pianists, acrobats, jugglers, etc. In the beginning, humorous texts were subject to censorship, in England at that time there was a commission that approved their presentation to the public. The artists presented comic sketches in which they imitated public figures or satirized stereotypes of upstarts and rich people of the time, or performed pantomime moments. Presentations of artistic moments may also be considered. Many of them contained jokes and improvisations. All of this together makes us consider the Music Hall, Britain's foremost ancestor of stand-up comedy.

The Music Hall genre of entertainment crossed the ocean, facilitating the appearance of vaudeville shows in America – a slightly popular entertainment, a dramatic species of light comedy, extremely popular in the USA and Canada during the 1880s-1930s. Composed of individual acts, without connection between them, performed by comedians, singers, dancers, ventriloquists, jugglers, acrobats, trainers, etc., the shows that delighted entire generations, were performed both on the biggest stages (such as New York's Palace

⁵ Mona Chirilă, *Figuri Centrale in Commedia dell'arte* [Central Figures in Commedia dell'arte] (Cluj-Napoca: Publishing House of the Foundation for European Studies, 2010).

Theater) and on stages improvised in the open air, becoming a central point of American life. Not free from the prejudices of the time, vaudeville was the first form of entertainment with exposure to the cultures of people living on the streets. It began to lose its popularity, with the advent of radios and televisions, through which people found a free way of entertainment. But vaudeville did not disappear without a trace. It left its mark in films that incorporated the vaudeville scene into animated comedy, in memorable productions such as those of Charlie Chaplin, and later in television shows such as Saturday Night Live or Late-Night with David Letterman. The latter are the ones that marked the beginnings of stand-up comedy in its current form, while also continuing the traditions of popular entertainment.

The rise of the phenomenon

Who would be considered the first man to do stand-up comedy? As we mentioned, at the end of the 19th century, in the USA, vaudeville shows, music hall or humorous monologues pave the way for stand-up comedy shows in the form we know today. Many sources consider Samuel Langhorne Clemens to be the father of stand-up comedy. Born on November 30, 1835, he is known by many other names, including: Thomas Jefferson, W. Epaminondas Adrastub Blab or Sergeant Fathom. But his famous pseudonym, famous and recognized all over the world is Mark Twain. He, in his attempt to increase his income by selling his successful books, used to go on tours of America reading them. But his meetings with viewers and readers were not simple readings, but were always colored with jokes and sometimes rather spicy remarks. Therefore, his public readings had the air of comedy shows, and Mark Twain had gained notoriety not only as a writer but also as a humorist.

Comedian Bob Hope remains perhaps the man who made stand-up comedy a staple of popular entertainment. With the original name Leslie Townes Hope, a native of Wales, arrived in the USA at the age of four with his emigrating family, he became a famous actor who has been involved in almost all entertainment environments. Debuting in vaudeville and continuing as an actor in musical films, he ended up starring in a series of comedy shorts

in the mid-1930s and then starting his own comic monologue radio shows. Silent films had only popularized physical comedy and slapstick, but cinema's evolution towards sound films and the advent of radio paved the way for Hope, inspiring him to create a character and style of his own in the form of disturbing verbal comedy. Known for skillfully constructing jokes and delivering them at breakneck pace, most of his comedy is based on an unsympathetic character. Bob Hope thus became one of the few comedians with a successful career, playing comic characters with unpopular roles. The multitude of films in which he starred under the umbrella of this familiarly unpleasant comic character of Hope, as well as the status of the top box office in America from 1941 to 1953, proves this.

His weekly radio monologues and touring performances during World War II, when he traveled overseas to bring smiles to soldiers, laid the foundation for the classic style of stand-up comedy. Most of his radio broadcasts during the war were broadcasted to military bases around the world. Being thus forced to constantly come up with new material, Hope formed around him a team of writers who made jokes on hot topics: news of the day, celebrity gossip, local gossip of the cities or armies he was visiting, etc. Thus, the style of stand-up comedy was shaped by fresh jokes, gaining momentum and leaving behind vaudeville with their gags, mostly interchangeable, almost endlessly repeatable.

Touring in the following decades, similar to that of World War II, during the American military involvement in Vietnam, Korea, and the Persian Gulf, earned Hope a strong reputation for his comedy shows performed for the armed forces, becoming, in 1997, the first Honorary Veteran in American history (title provided by the US Congress). Likewise, other titles medals and awards such as Honorary Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE), Congressional Gold Medal, Presidential Medal of Freedom and other awards for humanitarian services or contributions to the film industry demonstrate the power of humor in general and particularly that of the comedy outlined by Hope.

Bob Hope's classic stand-up comedy style dominated popular entertainment until the age of television, when it was picked up and used in promoted variety shows such as *The Ed Sullivan Show*. He is a vital component

in the history of American comedy, pioneering and personifying the comedic tastes of the post-World War II generation, when clever comedy and puns became highly prized.

In the same vein, promoting intelligent and involved comedy, in the 1950s Mort Sahl appeared on stage sitting on a stool, a rolled-up newspaper in hand, speaking naturally while making caustic comments about the political leaders of the day, about popular culture. His politically dissident nightclub comedy has found a crowd and inspired a number of comedians who have shown that stand-up comedy can be funny, intelligent, personal and socially engaged all at the same time. Sahl, the originator of political satire, influenced comedians such as George Carlin, Woody Allen and Jonathan Winters. He was also close to another trailblazer in the world of comedy, the highly controversial Lenny Bruce, social critic and satirist, famous for his open, free and critical form of comedy which contained satire on politics, religion, sex and vulgarity, in strong forms, avoided by televisions.

Blacklisted from television, Lenny Bruce was considered a crazy comic, repeatedly charged and arrested for violating obscenity laws in San Francisco, Chicago, Los Angeles, and obscenity sales trials become benchmarks for free speech in the United States. Although he died very young, following an overdose, Bruce is ranked third by Rolling Stone magazine in the list of the 50 greatest comedians of all time, behind Richard Pryor and George Carlin.

Television and talk or variety shows, many of them humorous, have given strong promotion to stand-up comedy and, by implication, to the comedians who practice it. The Tonight Show, one of the most popular American late-night shows, broadcast on NBC since 1954 (originally started in various studios in the Los Angeles area, and then made in the Rockefeller Center studios in New York) helped the number of stand-up shows to grow exponentially, thus starting hundreds of million dollars industry. In support of these claims, we remember that Jerry Seinfeld earned more than 820 million dollars doing stand-up comedy, and the actor Robin Williams collected about 100,000 dollars for just one evening of performance.

The stand-up comedy genre, extremely popular in the Anglo-Saxon countries and the USA, seems to have had no chance to be known very early in Romania. The fault lies with the political system. For many years, during

Communism, people were not able to address sensitive topics such as politics, racism, nor to express their personal beliefs. However, in the 70s there were outstanding actors like Toma Caragiu and Amza Pellea, who made sketches similar in style to stand-up comedy, but they always only touched on very comfortable subjects. The comic monologues usually presented in revue shows were censored, with actors forced to be subtle, forbidden to joke about subjects that endangered political power or taboo subjects. Despite these restrictions their comedy filled the halls. Also, while the genre had not yet made its appearance in Romania, Florin Piersic, through his stories, considered moments of sharing in front of the public his own states, experiences and situations he went through, often offered real, memorable stand-up comedy moments.

Around the 2000s, in a hall of the National Theater in Bucharest, Radu Gheorghe and Dan Chișu laid the foundations of stand-up comedy in the country. But few people knew about their endeavor. Stand-up comedy from Romania started, but still with small steps, a few years later in alternative locations with Claudiu Teohari, Viorel Dragu, Costel Bojog. In their first shows they used borrowed texts imitating famous American comedians, but they developed their own style over time. In 2007, Teo (Claudiu Teohari) became viral and grew in popularity with the *Vulgar Words-Cuvinte vulgare* video, which gathered millions of views. The public in the country also got to know the phenomenon, located for a long time only in the country's capital, awakening their desire to see shows performed by stand-up comedians in their own cities.

Stand-up bands were formed which, at first, went on timid tours: Deko Troupe – Teo, Vio, Costel, Micutz (the latter detaches not very long after, starting on his own path that combines stand-up comedy with improvisation); Showtime band – Tibi Neuronu, Cătălin Bordea, Cristian Dumitru; The Aristocrats band – Radu Isac, Sorin Pârcălab, Sergiu Floroia (Sergiu also soon chose the individual path). Many clubs and restaurants accepted the collaborations initially proposed by the comedians themselves, organizing shows with dozens, then hundreds of spectators, who anticipated the shows held in large halls. Although at the beginning a large part of the public in Romania was not prepared for the taboo subjects used in stand-up comedy, the vulgar language, or the jokes made at the expense of the spectators, not knowing how to react, it opened up to the new, grew and matured together with those from the stage.

Nowadays, the material of the comedians is getting better and better, the range of topics covered is expanding with strong topics like politics, religion, etc. The companies of impresario and show organizing (Artitude, Eventura) take over the tasks of the comedians, freeing them from the chore of looking for contracts and organize national tours with full halls in all the big cities of the country (ex. Stand-Up in the City – a tour concept carried out over several consecutive years). Because the public gets a taste with these stand-up comedy shows, organized in bars, pubs, restaurants, clubs, which are played at maximum capacity, sometimes there are two performances in the same location per evening.

The stand-up comedy industry

We start our discussion from an article written by George Bonea (journalist, stand-up comedian) and published on his personal blog, article with the title: *Doru Octavian Dumitru și Mizeria tabloidă* [*Doru Octavian Dumitru and Tabloid Misery*]. George Bonea analyzes another press article published on the website of the newspaper *Libertatea* with the title: *Comedian Doru Octavian Dumitru starts his career from scratch. He does shows in clubs*, article from which we quote:

“Doru Octavian Dumitru has returned to the country to make jokes for money, a series of meetings with the public in which he puts into practice his personal stand-up comedy. Doru Octavian Dumitru, aged 61, comes to the country from which he immigrated in the early 90s only for occasional performances. The competition on the Romanian comedy market, in which a lot of amateurs have become known in recent years, made him forget places like that of the Palace Hall (where, in the past years, he played with closed box office) and take it and from scratch, through the country’s clubs and restaurants, trying to assert himself in front of the new generations.”⁶

⁶ *Comediantul Doru Octavian Dumitru își ia cariera de la zero. Face show-uri prin cluburi*, *Libertatea*, 25 nov. 2017, <https://www.libertatea.ro/monden/comediantul-doru-octavian-dumitru-isi-ia-cariera-de-la-zero-face-show-uri-prin-cluburi-2052505>

Recalling the fact that stand-up comedy appeared in Romania only after the 2000s, at the beginning of the 90s, the artist's performances, although they were slightly close to the mentioned genre, through direct addressing, breaking the fourth wall, were more likely a one man shows, the artist mostly playing a character, with a specific language and costume, and the interaction with the audience was almost non-existent. It is true that Doru Octavian Dumitru's shows came closer to the stand-up comedy genre, after his emigration to the USA. The reason why we mentioned the article written by George Bonea on his blog is that we found in it the revolt against the idea launched by some ignorant of the stand-up comedy phenomenon (who, unfortunately, in the mentioned case, are editors of a famous Romanian publication) referring to the fact that only novice comedians, without a career or reputation, perform in alternative venues such as clubs and restaurants. One should not forget that the genre is characterized by such performance halls, where everything starts, where the texts are tested, where the performer feels close to the audience. We could even say that it forces repetitive performances in clubs and smaller spaces, even if the comedian's popularity allows him to perform in very large capacity halls.

"I have to say it right from the start: I was never a fan of Doru Octavian Dumitru. I bet he's a funny man, a great comedian (for his audience), but just as I never laughed heartily at Steve Martin or Andy Kaufman, I never laughed at Doru Octavian Dumitru either. There are certain styles of stand-up that I do not like. However, I respect Doru Octavian Dumitru for his ambition and the fact that he never stopped [...] Stand-up was and will always be for the clubs. TV appearances, serials, these launch your career and raise your score, but you will still do stand-up in a location with a microphone, a low ceiling and an audience in the dark. That's where this form of comedy is written. The career from scratch that is talked about in *Libertatea* is a perpetuum mobile when you are a comedian."⁷

⁷ George Bonea, *Doru Octavian Dumitru și Mizeria tabloidă*, 30 Nov. 2017, <http://georgeisme.ro/doru-octavian-dumitru-si-mizeria-tabloida/>

Many comedians who reached the heights of success following television appearances, and we are talking about big international names (the most famous example Jerry Seinfeld), continued to do shows in clubs. It is a specific part of stand-up comedy and one should not forget that even in the promotion of this genre on television, as it happens in the comedy series *Seinfeld*, when the comedian performs, the filming is also done in small, obscure spaces, with limited audience capacity. In the club it is possible to interact with the audience, the large theaters seem to impose a certain rigor, they seem to impose a certain behavior on the audience. Stand-up comedy shows in large halls are much closer to the one man/woman show genre in terms of interaction. The comedian forces communication there, while in alternative locations such as clubs, intimacy allows and instigates communication, as it were. That is why, in small halls, the comedian proves his true value, his ability to improvise, to keep the public under control. Comedy is written in these alternative locations, it is the area where people are “infected with the germ” and the area where comedians prove that they can do it. Every stand-up comedian has to go through this experience. Moving stand-up comedy shows from small alternative venues to large theaters is not a discussion about the ability of the comedians, their visibility/promotion, but the commercialization of the phenomenon, and the industry that forms around any money-making product.

*I'm Dying Up Here: Heartbreak and High Times in Stand-Up Comedy's Golden Era*⁸, which discusses the stand-up comedy phenomenon in the US around the 1970s, perfectly describes the first stages in the creation of the stand-up comedy industry. Promoting comedians with their appearance on Johnny Carson's *The Tonight Show*, and then making some performances following the appearance and their distribution all over the country, is the main subject of the book. It is an extremely interesting read for enthusiasts of what is the “behind the scenes” phenomenon. Writing prompts one to reflect on how fragmented this world is. Artists or success seekers? Infested with the germ of comedy or crazy for money? Impressionists or business people? and so on, the book analyzes many destinies of the comedians of the 70s who

⁸ William Knoedelseder, *I'm Dying Up Here: Heartbreak and High Times in Stand-Up Comedy's Golden Era*, (Public Affairs, 2010).

performed around Los Angeles, important artists, some depressed or vicious, some on the verge of madness, some obsessed with work, and others obsessed with the mania of persecution. Appearing on shows brings popularity to some comedians, lifting them up and offering them many shows in a row, as if at the expense of the others who did not have the chance to be invited. Many of those who were deprived of the mentioned chance fed, literally and figuratively, only from their comedy, from the energy they took and offered to the public in the shows performed in less significant locations in the country. For these people, comedy and the stage meant their lives, not being conditioned by the fact that they were famous or not.

In recent years, Romanian stand-up is going through the stage described in *I'm Dying Up Here: Heartbreak and High Times in Stand-Up Comedy's Golden Era*. We are living in Romania the 1970s of the US. Stand-up comedy is very popular and sought after by public. This led to a phenomenon of multiplying the so-called "stand-up comedians," fabricated by television, through contest shows dedicated to the genre. Televisions create stars, but they cannot train them professionally. They can influence the audience by offering them a few minutes of stand-up comedy, consecrating people who seem to be good comedians, but when they have to perform in front of an audience in authentic contexts, the result is disappointing.

If a few years ago we could talk about a performance, referring to the artistic act of stand-up comedy, now probably the appropriate term for it would be *show*. Why? The commercial component has become so important that the sale of this kind of comedy seems to take precedence over the quality of the show itself. It is no longer necessarily art for the sake of art, but art for the sake of selling. Is this inevitable when creating an industry? At the moment, Romanian comedians are divided into two categories:

- those who fell in love with the phenomenon, approached it over time by experimenting in various contexts, sought to observe it first and, only after becoming familiar with it, tried to test their own texts in small locations, analyzing if they are able to meet the expectations of the consumer public;

- those who, through TV/Internet exposure, aim to first create their reputation, and then appear directly on big stages, in front of a large audience.

Success can appear over time, through work, after years, or on the contrary, overnight through these TV appearances or edited viral clips. In the first choice, the comedians fight a battle, even internal, which causes frustrations, anguish, which some of them turn into sources of inspiration, wrapped in jokes and fruitful in comedy texts. In the second choice, the priority is the exposure, it comes before the delivery. The danger arises when, after this exposure, the comedian is “thrown” onto a stage in front of spectators whose horizon of expectation, as far as it is concerned, does not match reality at all. Television and the Internet have the power to build careers in the field of stand-up comedy (and not only), but at the same time there is a danger that they promote non-values, thus positioning them above the artists of the genre. Why does this phenomenon happen? When we talk about success, we talk about money. Renown or fame also translates into money. Comedy has become a business. Success means fans, the more fans, the more money.

In Romania, there are now two competition shows that do this kind of promotion, both according to international formats: *Romania's Got Talent* and *IUmor*. With their help, several names of stand-up comedians exploded, some totally unknown until the moment of their appearances. Their phones started ringing, the shows appeared all over the country. A fame inflated on the principle of commercials. Unfortunately, this fame does not improve the quality of the material presented, nor the real value of the artist. We cannot generalize, obviously not everyone who participates in this kind of shows is inexperienced and unprepared to deal with the results of the exposure. Because, there is exposure, there is demand. But it is a fact that some comedians, maybe much better, but without such exposure, remain without shows. Why? It is sold, the reputation is exploited, and that brings money. The patrons of the places where this form of comedy is practiced, as well as the impresarios who produce shows in large halls, prefer to work with “people the world knows from television”. Many years of work and practice fade in front of three minutes of appearance on television shows with a wide audience. If Dadaism and Futurism promoted free art, being against its sale, we can see here the other side of the coin.

The first schools in the field

Sometimes it is possible for an aspiring stand-up comedian to learn the craft on their own: there are numerous guides and handbooks that aim to describe the main lines of the craft for people who would like to learn it by themselves⁹. But it is not difficult to guess that the best start to performing in stand-up comedy can be taken under the guidance of someone who already has significant experience in this area, whose mind is trained to think comically and who can train other minds to think the same. That is precisely why the great universities of the world have opened their doors and endorsed courses dedicated to comedy. The first course of this kind was taught by Mel Helitzer (author of the book *Comedy Writing Secrets: The Best-Selling Book on How to Think Funny, Write Funny, Act Funny, And Get Paid For It*¹⁰) at the Scripps School of Journalism, Ohio University in 1980. Within three years this course had become so sought-after that the twenty spots allotted to it were filled a year in advance. Of course, this was extremely encouraging and other universities followed suit, soon starting courses with similar programs. Nowadays in the US more than sixty universities, including the University of California, Los Angeles and The New School, New York, offer high-level education specializing in the writing and presentation of humor. Looking at the most representative comedy schools, College Magazine makes a list in 2019 and publishes an article in June on its website: *Top 10 Colleges for Aspiring Comedians 2023*¹¹ which looks like this:

1. Columbia College Chicago
2. University of California, Los Angeles

⁹ Logan Murray, *Be a Great Stand-up: How to master the art of stand up comedy and making people laugh (Teach Yourself –General)* (John Murray Press, 2010); Dan Nainan, *The Best Book on How To Become A Full-time Stand-up Comedian* (Hyperink, 2012); Stephen Rosenfield, *Mastering Stand-Up: The Complete Guide to Becoming a Successful Comedian* (Chicago Review Press, 2017).

¹⁰ Mel Helitzer, *Comedy Writing Secrets: The Best-Selling Book on How to Think Funny, Write Funny, Act Funny, And Get Paid For It*, 2nd Edition (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 2005).

¹¹ *Top 10 Colleges for Aspiring Comedians 2023*, <https://www.collegemagazine.com/top-10-colleges-aspiring-comedians/> (accessed September 2023).

3. University of Southern California
4. Harvard
5. Emerson College
6. New York University
7. Indiana University
8. University of California San Diego
9. Arizona State
10. University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

Dozens of courses are also dedicated to stand-up comedy in higher education in the UK, the overwhelming majority being taught under the umbrella of Performing Arts. The first university to offer a “Stand-up Comedy” module was Middlesex University London in 1982, and about ten years later the University of Salford Manchester also opened its doors to the study of stand-up comedy. At least fifteen schooling establishments in the UK have taken up the model by offering such courses. Some examples are: Oliver Double’s course at the University of Kent, Canterbury (founded in 1997), Kevin McCarron’s course at the University of Roehampton, London (founded in 2000), Deborah Middleton’s course at the University of Huddersfield (founded in 2006). In 2007, Chris Ritchie founded an undergraduate course dedicated exclusively to comedy called “Comedy Writing and Performance” at Southampton Solent University, perhaps the most famous in the UK. Similarly, since 2014, the University of Salford Manchester has been offering one at BA level under the name “Study Comedy Writing & Performance”.

The profile of students in university humor courses was, and still is, very diverse. Not only those young people who are looking for a career after graduating the course, but most of the students already have a job in law, medicine, finance or various other fields of activity. These are those people who are aware that humor and the ability to be funny is a value both for their career and for their personal development, or for their physical and mental health. Today there are specialized educational programs in most of the world’s large universities, in countries developed from an economic, cultural and educational point of view, they are closely related to a healthy society, with freedom of thought and expression, with relaxation and desire for evolution.

Stand-up comedy is not only an artistic phenomenon but also a social one, risen from the need for free expression and, breaking taboos. The main goal is to produce rest and relaxation, but by taking on social themes and problems this also leads to awareness and sometimes to the change of faulty mentalities. The process of the artistic act through the comedian-audience relationship, makes both parties responsible. Let us not forget that, although everything seems so easy when a comedian with a microphone stands in front of an audience, successful stand-up comedy shows have many hours of work behind them. The comedian's improvisations and flashes of the moment are just some of the necessary ingredients for a quality show, but these also come with experience and the effort brought to the mission of giving joy.

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