

THE GREAT COMEDIANS: PERSONALITY AND OTHER FACTORS

Samuel S. Janus

The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between comedians and their anxiety and depression and to evaluate its function in their success as comedians. How this relationship is communicated to the audience and its interplay with the fears and anxieties of the audience will also be examined.

The world of the theatre has always found meaningfully symbolic the alternate faces of comedy and tragedy. Historically, court jesters were tragicomic figures — the embodiment of the bittersweet of life. Among the oppressed, the role of social critic has been the comedian's forte. Freud indicated that humor is a release for anxiety. To quote Abe Burrows: "The comedian must practice his comedy in order to avoid destroying himself." Jack Carter, another leading humorist, says: "The funny part, the laughter, is given to the audience, but the comedian is left with the bitter dregs." Comedy has been described by a leading theologian as: "The ability to laugh at one's own tragedy."

There appears to be an awareness on the part of the audience of the relationship between humor and anxiety. Consequently it would be reasonable to assume some awareness of the fact that comedians are very anxious and often depressed people. Some indication of the need to view humor as a release for tension can be seen in the increasingly sadomasochistic relationship between the comedian and his audience. As an example, witness the success of the recent Don Rickles album *Hello Dummy*. The comic is moving away from his historical role as caustic commentator on life and toward being a social activist and agitator (for example, the role of Dick Gregory and other new black comedians).

Humor, then, can be seen to be especially applicable in situations in which the individual feels himself to be powerless. One can note here the plethora of jokes about doctors, psychiatrists, undertakers, sex, and mothers-in-law. This paper will examine whether or not comedians who seem anxious, depressed, and articulate do ventilate their feelings and relieve their anxiety through their humor. It will also examine the relationship between the comedian and his audience, which will either accept or reject the credibility of the comedian. There is a close relationship between the comedian's suffering and the audience's believing that he is indeed suffering. There are numerous indications that many of our top comedians are really crying out loud. It is our con-

Samuel S. Janus, Ph.D., Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, New York Medical College.

tion that the comedian-audience relationship is based on mutual needs; the successful comedian is one who is able to verbalize the fears and anxieties of his audience and carry them to absurdity, the point at which it becomes possible to laugh at them.

It is useful here to consider the social and ethnic backgrounds of today's comedians. The field is dominated by members of minority and lower socioeconomic groups. The majority of comedians are Jewish, and there has been a recent increase in the number of black and Latin comedians. The role of the black comedian has changed in comedy, just as it has in society, from support (Jack Benny and Rochester) to autonomy.

Method

The data to support the above theses were gathered through psychological case studies, in-depth interviews with many of the leading comedians in the United States today, and psychological tests. In addition to a clinical interview, the instruments used were the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, Machover Human Figure Drawing Test, graphological analysis, earliest memories, and recurring dreams.

Population

Population consisted of 55 professional comedians. In order to be considered in this study, comedians had to be full-time professional stand-up comedians. Most of the subjects earned salaries of six figures or over, from comedy alone. In order to make the sample truly representative, each comedian had to be nationally known and had to have been in the field full time for at least ten years. The average time spent in full-time comedy for the subjects was twenty-five years. The group consisted of fifty-one men and four women. They represented all major religions, many geographic areas, and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Comedians were interviewed in New York, California, and points in between. Their socioeconomic backgrounds, family hierarchy, demographic information, religious influences, and analytic material were investigated. Of the population researched, 85 percent came from lower-class homes, 10 percent from lower-middle-class homes, and 5 percent from middle-class and upper-middle-class homes. All subjects participated voluntarily, received no remuneration, and were personally interviewed by the author.

Intelligence

I.Q. scores ranged from 115 to 160+. For a population at large, I.Q. scores in the average range are from 90 to 110. I.Q. scores in the bright-average range of intelligence, that is, from 108 to 115, were scored by only three subjects. The remainder scored above 125, with the mean score being 138. The vocabulary subtest was utilized. Several subjects approached it as a word-association test, but all regarded it as a challenge. Since these are verbal people, they were highly motivated. The problem was not one of getting them to respond, it was one of continuously allaying their anxiety, and reassuring them they were indeed doing well.

Family

No definite hierarchy of family position emerged. However, the subjects overwhelmingly stated that they felt closer to their mothers and that their mothers had played a far more active role in their lives than their fathers. Mother was seen as the accepting figure, as the one who had spent time with them, who had encouraged them, and understood their needs to be in show business and to be comedians. Fathers were described for the most part as either absent, uninterested, or overtly disapproving. There were only slight differences in this area for the comediennees. Fathers were also inadequate providers, and mothers had to spend time either stretching the take-home pay or working to supplement it. Most of the subjects had spent their early childhood in much closer association with their mothers, particularly in terms of a close-binding relationship. Their mothers were their friends and confidants, and the subjects related that they did much consoling, humoring, and wheedling of their mothers. The fathers were viewed as resentful of the close mother-child relationship and as scornful of the aspiring comic. Relationships with peers and siblings were generally good. Life always seemed to the comics to present situations in which they were misunderstood and picked on or belittled. Only three comedians reported that anyone other than their mothers really understood them. The divorce rate of parents was fairly low, with only 18 percent having come from divorced homes. In almost all cases, fathers were seen as well meaning but unable to understand the youngster. The subjects alternately expressed pity and sympathy toward their fathers, with very little awareness of the rage and disappointment they unconsciously felt. Apparently when the subject succeeded in show business the fathers' attitude became somewhat more accepting, but as one subject said bitterly, "You know, where was he when I really needed him?" Current relations with surviving siblings were reported as good for 92 percent of the population.

Our sample showed that only 4 percent had never married. Thirty percent had been living with their first wives for an average of nineteen years. Fifty-four percent had married twice, and the remaining twelve percent had been married three or more times.

Of those comedians who were Jewish and had married more than once, at least one wife was Jewish, and one not Jewish in 80 percent of the cases. Eighty-four percent had children, and of these 26 percent had adopted children. All expressed a sense of importance at being a father or mother and felt close to their children. Almost all worried about not being a good enough parent. The percentage of children is higher than normal in show business, and the percentage of adoptions is higher than in the random population. There seem to be indications here of the need to provide for and be a part of a family.

Educational Background

Educational levels ranged from sixth grade to third-year law school. Eighty-five percent completed high school successfully, and 15 percent had gone on to complete college. Many had been in college several times, for varying periods of time, but had left in disappointment. The prime reason given for not completing school was a lack of communication with teachers and a feeling of not being accepted. So strong was the

demand for recognition, understanding, and acceptance, that they viewed a teacher's own idiosyncrasies as personal rejection. Most subjects proudly related that they were self-educated and that they were voracious readers. This is important to note, because of the current emphasis on the political joke and the trend for the comedian to be a commentator on social issues.

Personality and Psychotherapy

Eighty percent of our population reported having been in some kind of psychotherapy. They repeatedly expressed the fear that if they were successful in analysis, to the point where their suffering was greatly relieved, they would then cease to be funny. This ambivalence gave way only when the pain was too great to bear, and then they would sporadically seek out psychiatric treatment. Very few, only 12 percent, remained in analysis for any appreciable length of time (at least one year) with the same therapist. Regardless of the actual amount of experience in a doctor-patient relationship they may have had, almost all the subjects viewed themselves as experts on human relations, suffering, and psychotherapy. All said that they understood themselves fairly well, and 40 percent stated that they felt that they understood themselves better than their therapist had. There was strong evidence that they had had power struggles with their therapists. Several subjects related the joke of the comedian who went into analysis and was told to "lie down on the couch and tell me everything you know." This is followed up with the punch line "And now he's doing my act in Philadelphia." Many said they tried to become personal friends with their analysts; they invited them to their performances and then attempted to involve them as critics. This doctor-patient role was not one that remained stable for long. The comic's need for supremacy in a power struggle with an overwhelming father who was viewed as disapproving came to the fore readily. This intensified their feeling of being subservient in the doctor-patient relationship. By luring their therapist into a "friend" relationship and into being a critic of their act, they took their therapist into an area in which they are the professionals and had greater expertise. In this sphere they could criticize and attack the therapist's judgment. With great indignation and righteousness, several reported they had dismissed their therapists as not really knowledgeable. This is a trap that is important for therapists to avoid when dealing with show people in general and comedians in particular. Humor is such a personal expression of one's feelings about oneself and one's world that it overlaps with much of the content of psychotherapy. As long as the doctor remained in his office, in a doctor-patient relationship with the comic, therapy progressed. It was when he went out of the office and into the audience that he lost both control and stature in the eyes of the comedian patient. The comic's need to put down the powerful authority figure seems very much of a repetition-compulsion.

Frequently voiced fears centered around excessive suspicion of the motives of others and the tenuous nature of their position as stars. Although they were popular now, they felt disaster and anonymity could strike them at any time. They used this as the reason they drove themselves to exhaustion in overwork and overexposure.

The word "essence" was an important word, often used by many of the subjects. They said it was their "very essence" that was being drained by the audience and that this exhausted them. Life's hardships, both internal and external, seemed to provide the material from which they drew and in turn shared with the public what is called humor. For example, Alan King's assaults on and his sense of outrage at banks, insurance companies, and airlines are outcries an audience can identify with, vicariously sharing both the rage and fantasy of revenge. Since it has been shown that much of humor is anger that is shared, then it must be voiced with credibility.

Age

The average age of population studied was forty-six. It is significant that there are very few female comics, and in our research we found no successful child comics. Most comedians said that they had not had early success as comedians. Several blamed their youth for this lack of early success, even some who are now considered to be at the top of the humor field nationally. Why do audiences look for physical maturity in their comedians? There is apparently a thin line between the anger a young "wise guy" evokes and the love an older "funny man" elicits. If one is to declaim about the suffering and anguish of life, it is credible only from one whose physical bearing seems to honestly reflect the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." Apparently aging, which destroys beauty queens, romantic actors, dancers, and singers, works in reverse for comedians. Since children have not suffered much and have no power, they do not do well as spokesmen for the power struggle of life.

Sex

It is significant that the population of this study was 93 percent male and only 7 percent female. This ratio is a fairly accurate reflection on the small number of women in this field. Women have traditionally been expected to whine and complain and nag; until recently women have not been believable as real sources of power, with the ability to right wrongs or wreak vengeance. Audiences and the population in general vary in the amount of hostility they will accept from women. Perhaps the women's liberation movement will in the future change this position and give women a credible voice and permit them to openly express aggression. None of our population were homosexual. While this seems unusual for show business, it apparently reflects the situation for comedians.

Conclusions

Fifty-five nationally recognized, professional comedy personalities were studied to determine how their personality and other factors affect their success as comedians. The results of this investigation reveal that comedians are brilliant, angry, suspicious, and depressed, and that most are men.

While comedians as a group are homogeneous in terms of age, sex, religion, and socioeconomic background, recent trends indicate a greater diversity. Comedians drive

themselves to the point of exhaustion in their work and even in the number of performances they do, so anxious are they that their star may fade tomorrow. No matter how famous any of our subjects were and no matter how long they had been in the limelight, there was a terror that, as one put it, "Although today I'm on top, tomorrow I may be a bum." This terror is one that virtually all successful comedians live with. Several were able to enjoy life and reap the benefits of their fame and fortune, but they were in a very small minority. Intelligence of our subjects ranged from bright-average to genius level. Overwhelmingly, most were in the superior to very superior range of intelligence. Most respondents felt a pervasive sense of depression which they battled with their work and, in some cases, with medication.

The early lives of all the subjects were marked by suffering, isolation, and feelings of deprivation. Humor offered a relief from their sufferings and a defense against inescapable panic and anxiety. The presence of these same needs and fears almost universally accounts for the success of these particular individuals as humorists. The fact that humor is a language of protest appears to mitigate their anxiety and permits them to function. However its role as an aggressive expression in its own right is particularly appropriate for this age.

It is felt that comedians are able to convert their rage from physical to verbal assault and that for many their comic routines are a form of acting out. For the most part, comedians are shy, sensitive, fearful individuals, who fight their fears constantly and who win only for short periods of time, needing repetitively to do battle with the enemy both within and without. They are keenly sensitive people who have an uncanny perception of the needs and fears of their audience. For the most part they are men and women who are empathic and are able to convert fear to humor and terror to laughter.

REFERENCES

- Freud, S. *Wit And It's Relation To The Unconscious*. New York: Modern Library, 1938.
 Litman, R. A. *Grave Humor*. Los Angeles: Mara Books, 1970.
 Bergson, H. *Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. New York: Doubleday, 1956.
 Koestler, A. *The Art of Creation*. New York: Macmillan, 1964.
 Sypher, W. *The Meaning of Comedy*. New York: Doubleday, 1956.
 Peddington, R. *The Psychology of Laughter: A Study in Social Adaptations*. New York: Gamut, 1963.
 Barron, M.L. "A Content Analysis of Intergroup Humor." *American Social Review* 15 (1950):88-94.
 Eastman, M. *The Sense of Humor*. New York: Scribners, 1921.

Reprint requests to 983 Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10028