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A fool for the joke

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Even the most popular and recognizable comics -- the Jerry Seinfelds, Bill Cosbys and George Carlins of the world -- had to step onstage for the first time with no idea if the audience would laugh or not. Chances are, they did it at some sort of "open-mic" night at their nearest comedy club or coffee shop,

and you can bet many of them had to hit the stage, stomach fluttering and sweat beading, after a fellow amateur had just sucked the life out of the room with two minutes of unfunny, monotonous monologue.

Successful comics will return to that open-mic again and again -- working out new material, trying older jokes again on a new audience -- and they will do it because they are compelled to step into the spotlight and make people laugh. Most of them bomb the first time, and usually the second, third and fourth times as well, but a few well-timed laughs will feed the comics' fire enough to draw them back.

Keith Stubbs, owner of Wiseguys Comedy Café in West Valley City, runs a weekly open-mic comedy "sausage night" -- as in, you don't want to see it being made -- every Wednesday. There are always about 20 or so comic wannabes willing to give stand-up a try each week, he said, but the turnover week to week is considerable.

Stubbs gets calls from aspiring stand-ups who just know they are going to kill when they take the stage for the first time, but he warns them not to expect too much. He has seen plenty of people try it once, never to return. But he has seen people get onstage and display real talent on their first try, too.

"I've seen a lot of comedy, so I can usually sniff it out," Stubbs said. "But if it's really good, that's usually a pretty good indication [the material's] not theirs."

Every three or four months, Stubbs will hold an amateur comedy competition, giving open-mic night regulars and first-time stand-ups a chance to measure themselves against other newbies. Each competitor gets three minutes onstage in front of an audience and a panel of professional comics acting as judges. The winner gets "a T-shirt and the respect of their peers," Stubbs said.

A recent competition featured 18 comics, all male, ranging from teenagers to middle-aged men. Some were clearly comfortable

onstage, while others had a deer-in-the-headlights look when the spotlight hit them. Some had material that was genuinely funny, while others' jokes were so brutally bad you found yourself begging for the "Time's up!" red light to go on long before their three minutes expired.

Sina Amedson, who took the stage as "Sina Ali Ba Ba," was one amateur who looked comfortable, although he said he was still nervous even after he was done with his three minutes. Starting off proclaiming "I'm going to be different than other Persian comics you've seen," Amedson got some good laughs and eventually came in second place overall. Amedson did his first open-mic night in July, after attending a couple to watch a friend try stand-up.

"I went back and wrote a bunch of stuff, and when I came back the first time [to try it myself], I choked," Amedson, 21, said after his set, recalling that his first joke was something about being a Persian cab driver. "The lights get in your eyes and you can't see anybody out there. You realize you're all alone."

Amedson splits his time between working at a restaurant, attending the University of Utah, doing acting and improv and performing at these open-mic nights. He figures he has done about 10 or 15 stand-up attempts, and he'll be back.

"I've got something that just draws me to want to be in front of people," Amedson said.

Salt Laker Michael Jenkins, 19 and a former winner of the amateur comedy contest, was just the opposite; he had material and desire, but did not know if he could hop onstage and do it.

"I had to come and watch a bunch of shows before I got up the courage," Jenkins said, and even then, some of his friends had to surreptitiously sign him up for one of the open-mic nights to get him onstage. Asked if he had any jokes for such a surprise performance, Jenkins said, "I had material, but I wouldn't consider it material now."

Trenton James, who looks somewhat like a younger, skinny Will Ferrell, is a 29-year-old native of Williams, Ariz. -- a town where "if you're not good-looking or good at sports, you have to be funny or you get your ass kicked." He is also one of those amateurs who nearly gave it up based on his first experience at open-mic night.

"I got up once in January and I was so terrified I didn't do it again for three months," James said.

Still, he did return and after consistently performing at the open-mic nights, he won the most-recent contest, using much of the same material from when he bombed that first time 10 months ago. James does acting work and improv, but stand-up comedy is where he wants to be, like so many of the amateurs who take the stage each Wednesday.

"I've always loved stand-up, and to me stand-up is the most pure form of entertainment," James said. "It's you and your thoughts up there, with a microphone in your hand."

So, you think you're funny?

Amateur open-mic night -- a k a "Sausage Night" -- is every Wednesday at 8 p.m. at Wiseguys Comedy Café, 3500 S. 2200 West in West Valley City.

Interested? Call 463-2909 for information.

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