

# The Washington Post

## So Who's the Comedian?

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According to a recent poll, 84 percent of adult American men believe they are funnier than the average stand-up comic, and that if they ever got up behind a mike and in front of a brick wall they'd bring down the house.

I just made that poll up, but literal truth is inessential to being a stand-up comic, which I now am. I became a stand-up comic at 12:45 yesterday afternoon when I walked onto a stage at the Improv, Washington's top comedy club, and did a "bit." It was an open-mike casting call in which professional and semi-pro comedians had exactly two minutes each to perform for a big-shot producer, in the hope of landing a shot at a spot at the U.S. Comedy Arts Festival next February in Aspen, Colo.

During my two minutes, I learned many things about the craft of comedy, the main ones being:

1. Two minutes is a very, very, excruciatingly long time.
2. You should always remember not to inhale beads covered with spit, because you can die.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

I submitted my name as George Spelvin, the catchall pseudonym used in early theater when an actor did not wish to be identified by his real name. I used this name on the theory that no one would be old enough to have heard it, inasmuch as most of the 45 comics in attendance seemed to range from 25 years old to maybe 11. They also ranged from male to female, good to bad, and dirty to real dirty to un-%\*#@\$%l-believably dirty. One routine, by comic Douglas Berryhill, repeated the S-word 44 times, by my count. Remember, this is a two-minute gig.

Some jokes were printable, if not exactly genteel.

"My girlfriend calls me her Popeye," said Doug Hecox, "because of my build. I call her Sweet Pea because she has a bladder infection."

Kevin Downey Jr. confessed to being a little weird: "My dad says I'm too effeminate for my own good. But my gynecologist says there's nothing to worry about. . . . My wife asked me, if you could have sex with any woman living or dead, who would it be? I said Cindy Crawford, dead."

You would think an audience consisting entirely of stand-up comics would be pretty demanding. But this crowd was enthusiastic, since virtually all them are dreadfully underemployed. The 1990s have not been a prosperous time for club comics. Club comedy has been clobbered by cable TV--which makes good stand-up available for free--and by stricter DUI laws, which make people less likely to patronize drinking clubs. And so these comedians, by and large, had

wounded eyes and a slightly hunted look, and they needed laughs and were not about to deny them to others.

One of the loudest laughers, and better comics, was Joe Hansard, from Dundalk, Md. Hansard says the biggest paycheck he ever got from a gig was \$40. "Wait," he amended, pointing to fellow comic Nick Curtin, who looks exactly like a young Fatty Arbuckle, "Nick and I once got \$50, but we had to split it."

The one-liners continued.

Wendy Webb said she had some lump on her arm and was hoping it would develop into a third nipple; it might help her get guys.

Debbie Perlman said she was weirded out by a sperm bank: "I can't imagine getting pregnant from a total stranger. (Pause.) While I'm sober."

One guy named Laughing Lenny may well have been a comic genius but he spoke so fast, and in such thick street dialect, that virtually no one in the audience could understand a thing he said. My notes read, verbatim: "Iwa swa ig'n hawta fwahzz sma sheeee."

He got a nice round of applause.

I didn't decide to perform, for sure, until I heard Laughing Lenny.

I am not a comic, have never appeared onstage, am awkward before a mike, have no spontaneity and basically no interpersonal skills. But I have written some funny things in the newspapers, and I figured that if you can write funny, you can be funny. That was my first mistake.

My second mistake was not staying in my seat when George Spelvin's name was called. Good stand-up comics hone their acts over months if not years, polishing them before bathroom mirrors, their friends, etc. I developed the key element of mine the morning I went on. The last thing I did before I left the house was bring a box full of plastic beads, because I figured they could be a prop for something. I figured out what between Tenleytown and Van Ness on the Red Line, and wrote the bit in the margins of my Washington Post, which I then accidentally tossed away at the station.

Here's a fact I didn't know: When you are onstage in the spotlight, you can see nothing but the spotlight. You are totally blinded by the light, not in the sense of a man undergoing an intense religious awakening, but in the sense of a man staring at a thermonuclear explosion through binoculars. And so for the first few seconds of my two minutes, I was simply staring forward, mouth agape, expressing the concept: "Uuungh."

Finally:

"This is the debut of my career as a professional stand-up comic. It's a kind of a special moment for me. I'd like to take this opportunity to say something to my mother, who was an inspiration to me throughout my life. My mother is dead. She died a few years ago, but I feel she is still with

me. All the time, wherever I go, I feel her presence. Day in and day out. So I would like to say this to her. LEAVE ME ALONE, MA!"

Some people actually laughed.

Then I said, "Anyway, this really is my first time onstage, and I'm pretty insecure because, y'know, I'm not all that funny and I have a really lousy stage presence . . ."

People were laughing. Yes, I realize they were mostly laughing about how bad I was, but, um, I seemed to be working reasonably well as the butt of my own joke.

". . . And when I'm nervous I tend to stammer and stutter and, y'know, projectile-vomit and . . ."

Still laughing.

"But I've been working on the problem. A long time ago a Greek guy named Demosthenes had the same problem I have, and he became a great orator by sticking pebbles in his mouth, so I thought I would [and here I began putting the beads in my mouth] try that. See, the idea is that if you can talk through the pebbles [now I was stuffing them in by the handful] you can learn to . . ."

More laughter.

". . . talk better and wfnm fmuff frmphm grphnm fprm . . ."

I looked at my watch, said something that might have sounded like "My time is up," and left to somewhat spirited applause. What the audience did not know was that I was quietly choking on a slippery bead. I finally hawked it up, but for a few seconds it occurred to me I might actually die for my art.

When I got back to my seat, Nick Curtin told me he'd wished he'd used my bead act.

My act!

After all the performances were done, the comedy honcho, Lou Viola, chose his 12 finalists to perform later that night, in a second audition. Joe Hansard made the cut, and Doug Hecox and Debbie Perlman and Wendy Webb. Nick Curtin did not. Kevin Downey did not. George Spelvin did not.

Afterward I asked Viola how the judging went.

Okay, he said, noncommittally.

Viola is a guy about my age, around 50, a kindly-looking man with a gray beard and a very difficult job. He knows stand-up, and has to make some hard decisions about the careers of some earnest and vulnerable people. As we spoke, a polite kid came up to us. Paul Jay is 24. He didn't

make the final cut. He and asked Viola for a critique. Before Viola could answer, Jay blurted, "Sometimes I don't know who I am as a comic."

Viola nodded encouragingly. "Right. The audience needs to figure out who's talking to them." He asked Jay why he performed, and Jay said, "It validates me."

Viola thinks Jay has some promise. But sometimes, he says, "I want to say to someone, 'You're never going to be a stand-up comedian. How are you going to support your family?' " But he never says that. He tries to be upbeat.

I asked him what I did wrong.

Everything, he said.

Oh.

"You took way too long to get to the punch line of your first joke, waaaaaaay too long, and Demosthenes needed a better payoff."

So basically, I sucked?

"Basically."

Oh.