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IN A FIELD LONG DOMINATED BY MEN, WOMEN ARE NOW BRAVING THE SPOTLIGHT TO MAKE OTHERS LAUGH. BY DAVID SMIEDT

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On a bleak winter's night, Jennifer Wong, Amelia Jane Hunter, Kathryn Bendall and Vanessa Hill knew that one, some or even all of them might die. All, however, hoped to kill. The deed would take place at The Roxbury Hotel in the inner-western Sydney suburb of Glebe somewhere between eight and nine pm.

Welcome to the brutally simple equation that is stand-up comedy, where – to use the performers' parlance – you either slay the audience or are slain by them. With no plotline, ornate sets, flashy choreography, catchy beat or elegant script to fall back on, the comedian faces a jury of their peers with just a headful of anecdotes, perhaps a fortifying emergency pun and the hope there might be a sympathetic crowd in tonight.

Once a field so dominated by men that the few female performers became notable exceptions by their mere presence, this disparity is closing as increasing numbers of women take to the stage.

Added to the daunting nature of public speaking is the burden of expectation. Out there in the darkness beyond the spotlight's arc is a paying audience entitled to and demanding nyucks for their bucks. A final soupçon of terror is thrown into the mix in that no other form of entertainment readily encourages from its audience the immediate vocal verdict that comedy does.

Despite the severity of the talent litmus test provided by stand-up comedy, every week across Australia dozens of women step into pools of cold light on bare stages to shtick their necks out. The open mic nights where they perform are the bottom rung of the laugh ladder. Apart from the odd →



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Vanessa Hill, Jennifer Wong, Kathryn Bendall and Amelia Jane Hunter work the room.

established performer bleeding new material, most of these women live ordinary lives far removed from the comedy circuit. Working full-time jobs and often juggling families, they will perform for five strictly-timed minutes – after which a bell will dismiss them from the stage. They will not be paid. Instead, they receive mic-time in which to hone their skills and the venue has another name to add to the “six great comics for one low price” flyer. This is the deal, this has always been the deal and if you don’t like it, go back to working the office water cooler for laughs.



VANESSA HILL, a 26-year-old disability support worker, has been on the open mic circuit for seven years and says “it’s the adrenaline rush on a good night” that keeps her coming back. She is also, however, quick to acknowledge there are plenty of occasions when the strategic pauses left for guffaws are filled with deathly silence.

Like many open micers, Hill got her start in the Raw comedy competition hosted by radio station Triple J. Despite reaching the final in 2001, she maintains, “It was only in the

last minute or so I forgot how frightened I was and the jokes could flow. I still get incredibly nervous and it’s only after I get the first laugh that the feeling goes away.”

Not that you’d know it from watching the former supermarket worker perform. The unpretentious nature of her material is echoed in her presentation. With her hair tied back and a face free of make-up, she takes to the stage in a hoodie and cargos, linking her comedic “bits” with her trademark segue, “What else we got?”

Drawing on her experiences behind the check-out and being one of few Anglo kids at her school, she conjures a stage cocktail that is equal parts confidence and vulnerability – all washed down with a mischief chaser.

I’m putting on a bit of weight as I get older. The other day, I was walking down the street and I had the feeling something was following me. It turned out to be my arse

Vanessa Hill

JENNIFER WONG, a 25-year-old temp with a degree in Asian studies, is next to take the stage. Soft-spoken and cerebral, she elocutes with rounded vowels characteristic of her Hong Kong Chinese ancestry. “I grew up in an area of Sydney with McDonald’s corporate headquarters on one side and the original Hillsong Church on the other,” she says. “And if that isn’t directing you to stand-up, I don’t know what is.”



Hailing from a home so strict Wong originally felt compelled to tell her father she was doing “public speaking”, she mines the rich comic tradition of poking fun at the wider population’s misconceptions about her culture.

With lines such as “My parents are so conservative we were only allowed the Yellow Pages”, Wong racks up laughs from an audience who are clearly delighting in being confronted with their own stereotypes. “I’m unsure how long I can do that for,” she confides. “I don’t want to become known as the Asian girl stand-up – a one-joke comic.” For now, however, she concedes it’s working.

“I DATED THIS ONE GUY WHO SAID, ‘You’re too much woman for me.’ What does that mean? Would you like some man thrown in there too?”

Amelia Jane Hunter



AMELIA JANE HUNTER, the next on stage, is a 33-year-old scriptwriter. Wearing high-waisted trousers and a silk top, her stylish look seems at odds

with her raucous performance. Not every joke hits home, but those that do leave a mark.

Hunter’s set is a timely reminder that while dumbed-down mainstream cinema and music are no longer the vehicles for social commentary they once were, the bite of stand-up comedy has not been diminished.

“The person I am on stage is the same one I am off it, only a little angrier,” says Hunter, who trained as an actress but became frustrated by the limited nature of the roles available to Australian women. →



"There are certainly a lot more women doing stand-up," she says. "Seeing another woman on stage is empowering. It gives you permission to do it too. And if you think watching makes you feel good, wait until you've been up there. Besides, most comedians have such dismal social lives that we have to turn up to gigs to get the validation other people receive from friends."



I thought I'd failed as a mum till my son came home from school saying that in support of Sydney's water restrictions, he had started cutting up the neighbours' hoses for his bongos"



Kathryn Bendall

KATHRYN BENDALL, a 55-year-old comic who co-runs Comedy On The Rox

at the Roxbury Hotel, cherishes the open mic *esprit de corps* almost as much as performing. "Like survivors of some terrible catastrophe, we are inextricably linked in our mutual understanding of how tough, scary, challenging and, paradoxically, fun this world can be.

"We also share a compelling virus that drives certain people to stand up on stage desiring only to make others laugh. This infection seems to know no boundaries. It hacks a path into all levels of society, socio-economic backgrounds, education, race and sex. Delving into the personal histories of comics usually produces early symptoms ranging from class clowns and truants to dysfunctional families with drug and alcohol addictions. Pain and anguish is the stuff of comedy and stand-ups are merely their envoys."

"Stand-up comedy's first commandment states irrefutably that there is a five-year apprenticeship to be served," she says. "That's five painful years of getting up, falling over and generally honing your skills. That's fine if you're in your 20s or 30s, but at 55 and just starting out, I needed to compress that timeline somewhat. Opening my own room seemed like a solution. Comedy on the Rox is the fruit of my comedy partner Adrian Saunders' lifelong desire to have a comedy room and my imminent

OPEN MIC RECOLLECTIONS

TRIPLE J'S TERRI PSIAKIS

"I was billed as 'Terry Psiakis' and was brought on stage by the MC with the phrase 'this next guy's really funny, please make him feel welcome ...' The experience taught me to always introduce myself to the MC before a gig."

CORINNE GRANT

"The weirdest gig I ever did involved a man in the front row taking out his false eye and throwing it at me. He thought I would like to hold it. In case you're wondering, it felt warm. And slippery."

MESHEL LAURIE, HOST OF ABC TV'S STAND UP!

"I met virtually every friend I have at open mic comedy nights in Melbourne in the mid-'90s. You tend to run into the same handful of people four or five nights a week during the most vulnerable period of your life. It has a certain bonding effect."

mortality."

Although she notes there's little that compares with the adrenaline rush of making a room of people smile, one can't escape the feeling Bendall is moved by more altruistic forces. A desire to fulfil her comedic ambitions while providing others with the opportunities she wished she'd had 20 years, two children and one marriage ago.

Yet it's precisely these experiences which enrich her material. Her contemporaries relate to the trials of living with both teenagers and hormone replacement therapy, while younger audiences see a side to Bendall's generation all too rarely glimpsed between piercing negotiations.

This dynamic was brought home to Bendall at the Raw semi-final where she went into the toilet and was followed by two teenage girls. Outside her cubicle, she could hear them doing her routine word for word. "Poking my head round the door" to ask what was going on, Bendall was told they had enjoyed her show so much at the competition heats, they had come to cheer her on. It was a moment she says she will never forget and one that

While open micers like Bendall, Hill, Wong and Hunter all undoubtedly acknowledge this to be the proven path to a full-time comedy job which can earn performers up to \$2,000-\$3,000 per show, it's not their automatic desire and only a fraction of their ilk ever crack the big time. For Hill, the dream burns bright while in Hunter and Wong's case, writing careers beckon. Like most amateur comics, once the house lights are turned up, it'll be back to their nine-to-five lives, with relationships to manage and budgets to massage. Yet next week at half-filled pubs all around Australia, women just like them will be patiently waiting for their five minutes in the spotlight and the first gag to hit home.

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