

Paul D'Angelo

By: Michelle Lynn

How long have you been doing stand-up?

I started a little over 20 years ago. I was working as an Essex County (Massachusetts) Assistant District Attorney at the time.

What made you try stand-up for the first time?

I started going to see live comedy and was a huge fan of Boston's Steven Wright. After I performed a 45 minute presentation during a "roast" at my best friend's bachelor party I went back to the comedy clubs as a critic instead of as a spectator, trying to determine if I could be successful as a stand-up. Because I was a good lawyer, I knew that I did not have the luxury of "sucking" until I improved enough to be legitimate, so I wrote jokes for a year before I signed up for my first open mike. I wanted to have 20 minutes of good material before I did 5 and wasn't worried about my presentation because I had prosecuted almost 100 bench and jury trials to that point. I did only 10 open mikes before I quit under pressure from my family to "act like a lawyer," but I couldn't get it out of my system. I wrote for another year or so and came back as a headliner. From that point on I was booked 4 to 7 nights a week while I supervised a series of DA's offices in several different courts. I kept that schedule for 7-8 years, then did the same while working as a criminal defense attorney before I moved to LA for six years in 1996.

In your opinion, what are the fundamentals of being a good comic?

I believe that any successful stand-up comedian necessarily has to bring something intangible to the table when they begin... either a good sense of humor, or natural timing, or a talent for storytelling, or a special charisma, or unique character, or unique look, or creative writing skills... or a combination thereof. After that it is all hard work, dedication, passion and commitment. There are no shortcuts.

How should a comic go about putting together their first five-minute set?

When you are first starting out, I suppose you should just compile your funniest 5-minutes of material and keep working it and rewriting and adjusting your presentation until you have perfected it. I would suggest writing about subjects that are unique to you and your life so that you can start to create a stage persona which is distinctive and genuine.

After that, you have to just keep trying to add to that core material. Unfortunately, 5-minute open-mike sets don't leave much room for experimentation, but you have to be willing to take chances if you want to grow. You simply cannot be afraid to fail... it's the only way you'll ever get better.

When you were first starting out, what was some of the best advice you had received?

Honestly, no one really went out of their way to give me advice when I started out. That is totally understandable because I was the “new guy” who came from out of nowhere and I was competing for stage time and work with the veterans of the Boston comedy scene. It is a territorial thing... like a wild animal protecting their young. I tell new comedians that other comics will generally be nice to you until you become a threat to their livelihood. For me, it was mostly trial and error and learning from my mistakes. It is one of the reasons I make it a point to go out of my way to help new comics.

What advice would you give to someone who was just starting out?

Get on stage as much as possible, in as many different situations and circumstances as you possibly can, and try to learn something from every single experience that will make you a better comedian. Don't ever waste stage time by going through the motions without making some kind of progress. You'll only get out of your act what you put into it. Even if the only thing you acknowledge is that you did something horribly wrong, at least you can eliminate that mistake from the equation and focus on fixing it.

What are some of the most frequent mistakes you see new comics (and even seasoned ones) make that they should try to avoid?

In an effort to compile as much material as possible comics will often move on before they have perfected a routine or milked it for all its potential. When I lived in LA I was helping a young comedian who ran a new bit by me. I asked, “What do YOU think of that joke?” He said, “I think it's a good joke.” I answered, “Why wouldn't you want it to be a GREAT joke?” He never even considered that. It's all about how good you want to be. Will you settle for mediocrity or put in the time and effort that's necessary to make your act great. I have routines that I am still rewriting, even after successfully incorporating them into my act for many years. I consider everything in my act a “work in progress.”

What are some of the things you would tell people to look out for in their set?

A couple things come to mind. Obviously, you want to make sure that you are not doing some other comic's material. There is always going to be some overlap in subject matter but it is hard to overcome a reputation as a “thief” if you are doing someone else's bit verbatim. I don't approve when comics tell “joke-jokes” in their act. You'll earn my respect more if you fail with your own material than if you resort to getting cheap laughs by telling jokes that have been passed around. If you can't come up with your own stuff, maybe you should try another profession. Stay to your allotted time and be respectful to the other comics on the show. Also, I've seen comics who turn on the same crowd that they are supposed to be winning over... try not to alienate your audience.

After having done comedy for many years, what keeps you going back to do it every night?

Sure, stand-up comedy can be like any other job at times... I've been on my 10th show in 4 nights, I'm tired and I just don't feel like being funny... but, when the spotlight hits me, I always give

100% because I try to keep things in perspective. I try to treat every opportunity to perform as a privilege. I remind myself of the alternative: working a “real” job with long hours when my heart isn’t really in it; being a drone with no flexibility, no autonomy and no freedom; having to kiss ass and take orders from people who are often dumber than I am vs. getting paid for something I truly love to do.

You have a sterling reputation for having hours of material and can deliver a different hour-long set several times over- How do you do it?

It’s all hard work and a passion for my craft. I’ve heard many comics declare that they have tons of material. The key is to have a lot of quality material, not just quantity. I once saw one notoriously lousy comic (who had been doing it for years without success) writing furiously in a booth. I asked him what he was doing. He said, “My goal is to write 1000 new jokes before the end of the summer.” I said, “Why don’t you try to write one good joke instead?” If I have a good idea and I can’t get it to work on the level of the rest of my act, it becomes a challenge. It’s a great sense of accomplishment when you realize that you finally got it right and your act is that much stronger because of it.

What sparks you to write new material?

For me, it’s just the endless urge to create something new from nothing. Some comics are content to do the same old thing every night... not me. Once I perfect a joke and use it over and over again, I eventually get bored with it and I know that, if I’m not 100% enthused about doing my material, it is not only less fun for me, but my ambivalence will be subliminally detected by the crowd. When that happens, I’ll put the joke on the shelf for a while, then bring it back down the road when it seems fresh to me once again.

Creativity comes and goes... you can’t force it... so, when I get stuck for new ideas, I go over old notes and jokes that need work and try to make them viable. As far as generating new material, mostly you just need to train yourself to look for it in everyday life. Comedic material is everywhere... in the newspaper, on the Internet, on TV, at your job, in your family, on your drive to work, at the supermarket, at your kid’s Little League game, etc... but if you’re not specifically looking for it, its potential will go untapped.

This is a question I ask almost all of my interviewees because they all have a different way of handling it... How do you handle hecklers?

I honestly don’t get too many hecklers anymore. Maybe because I demand the crowd’s attention; maybe because I don’t leave too much opportunity for people to interject; maybe because my stage persona discourages it. Also, because the comedy scene is no longer primarily a “club driven” profession I don’t perform at as many comedy clubs anymore, which is where you tend to get more drunken hecklers, as opposed to corporate conventions, company parties, fundraisers, etc.

That is not to say that it doesn’t happen or I shy away from confronting hecklers that disrupt a show. When I hosted a weekly show at Nick’s Comedy Stop in Boston for 7+ years in the late

80's/early 90's it was typically like the Russian-roulette scene in *The Deer Hunter* with the atmosphere of a cock-fight. The room was packed with 300-400 animals every night and I deliberately forced myself to work the crowd so that I would improve on my improvisation skills. There were times when I would specifically write comebacks for different situations. Most people don't realize how much preparation is required in order to appear spontaneous.

I would advise comics to not come across as a bully. You want to keep the crowd on your side and turn them against the heckler if he persists. In extreme cases I will beg the selfish idiot to not ruin the show for all the others who paid their hard-earned money to enjoy the show.

Do you have a most memorable show? What was it and why was it so memorable?

I would venture to guess that, if you ask just about any veteran comedian what their best show ever was, they would find it difficult to recall any one show that really stood out... BUT, if you asked what their worst show was, you could sit down with a case of beer and hear a series of nightmare scenarios that they will never, ever forget. I explain that by saying that a pat on the back lasts a moment, while a knife in the gut will leave scars for a lifetime.

Is there anything you have learned through your years as a comic that you feel every comic should know?

Respect the stage. Never take the opportunity to perform for granted.

Here's another thing: Anyone who ever had the need to tell me how funny they were, never actually was. That's their insecurity talking. If you are truly legitimate, let your act speak for itself and it will validate you.

How do you deal with a set that you know just isn't going well? (variation of the same question, below)

What do you think is the best advice you can give to a comic who knows the audience just doesn't "get you"?

If what you mean by not "getting it" is that you're just having a bad set, there are a million reasons why a set-list that "kills" one night might bomb the next... different atmosphere, lighting, sound, timing of your appearance, demographics of the crowd, layout of the room, preceding acts, the type of event, dynamics of the room, etc. As you gain experience and proficiency a comedian can help to minimize the deficiencies by making adjustments to your act... changing the material, your presentation, your energy level, projecting more, etc... it's something you have to work on.

If what you mean is that you are just not reaching the audience with your material then that is a different story. When you're developing an act, I suppose a comedian makes a conscious decision to either try and create a presentation that reaches as many people as possible (the general public; a cross-section of society) or you can choose to cater to a specific target audience. (ex. Andrew Dice Clay) If you are intent on being all-inclusive and an audience doesn't "get you" I would think you're doing something wrong and you need to reevaluate your writing choices.

On the other hand, if you are attempting to appeal to a certain segment of the population then you can't be afraid of alienating the other elements of the crowd because it is inevitable. You should be committed to your act and stick to it, knowing the consequences.

When you think you're losing a crowd, is there anything that works for you that can usually get them back?

I would think that most crowds that are "lost" are out of it from the beginning. It's not your fault, you've just been dealt a bad hand and try to make the best of it. If you lose a crowd that you once had, that means you've either done something wrong or your act is not consistently strong from beginning to end. Reevaluate your act and/or your presentation to see where you're lacking, then work on correcting it.

Some comics will say any stage time is good stage time- while others will tell you if it's not a good audience and you're not going to get feedback- don't bother with it. What do you think is right?

I definitely advocate performing under as many different scenarios as you possibly can. When I was a trial attorney I quickly appreciated the fact that I learned much more from doing something wrong than I did from doing it right because you are humiliated into finding a solution. Doing difficult shows are like swinging a weighted baseball bat in the on-deck circle... it makes the good situations that much easier.

Do you still get nervous before a show?

Under normal circumstances, I never get nervous. I am very comfortable on stage. However, there are situations that definitely create anxiety. You can imagine: your family is in the audience; a friend is seeing you for the 1st time and you know it's a lousy situation; it's an important audition; you're videotaping; the place is a madhouse; etc., but, when you are confident in your abilities, you're just hoping the crowd is accommodating so you can do your best and make a good impression. Other than that it's usually just, "Give me the damn mike and let me do my thing."

What's the most likely culprit to bring on the nerves?

Going back to being a trial attorney, the only time I ever got nervous was when I wasn't fully prepared. Knowing that you have worked hard to prepare and having experience under many different circumstances are the keys to confidence.

Is there anything you do (or would suggest people do) to calm those nerves?

Some people never get over it. One of the greatest athletes, and arguably the greatest winner in history, Bill Russell (2 NCAA championships; Olympic gold medal and 11 NBA titles with the Celtics) threw-up his guts before every game... but still excelled. Try to "turn the fear into fire" and use the pent-up energy to your advantage.

Have you ever looked at an audience and immediately thought to yourself... “This is going to end very badly?”

Absolutely. An experienced comic can assess a situation and immediately determine that it is going to suck, no matter what you do or how entertaining you are... it is out of your hands. But knowing that never makes it any easier. It can feel like an eternity and you still tend to take it personally. For example, I have been asked to kick-off a national convention in Las Vegas at 9:00am on a Monday morning several times. You know it's not going to be easy, but you plow through it, do your time and always give your best because you never know who is paying attention.... then you feel like shit until your next good show.

What do you think the difference is between being clean and dirty? (If a comic is told to keep it clean- how clean is clean?)

Is there an advantage to doing clean material v. blue material?

If I were advising a new comedian I would certainly recommend working as clean as you can if you want to work as much as possible. The more universal your act is, the more situations you can plug yourself into without alienating audience members and horrifying the people who booked you. If your goal is to work corporate shows, fundraisers, cruise ships, and/or television you're wasting your time writing offensive material. You can still walk the edge and get the same results as long as you are not graphic or gross.

What are some of the ways to ensure getting hired for paying gigs?

First of all, if you are funnier than anyone else, you will always find work. That only comes with a combination of talent and effort. But being funny is not the be-all, end-all... many very funny comedians have blown countless opportunities because they were unreliable; they consistently showed up late or drunk; they had oversized egos; they treated audiences or staff with contempt; they were known for going over or under their time; they were known to occasionally “mail-in” their sets; they were assholes; they were inappropriate for certain circumstances... so just be funny and act like a professional.