

Second City comedy school teaches funny

Weekly Stand-Up 101 classes offer supportive environment for aspiring comics to hone their jokes and find their voice

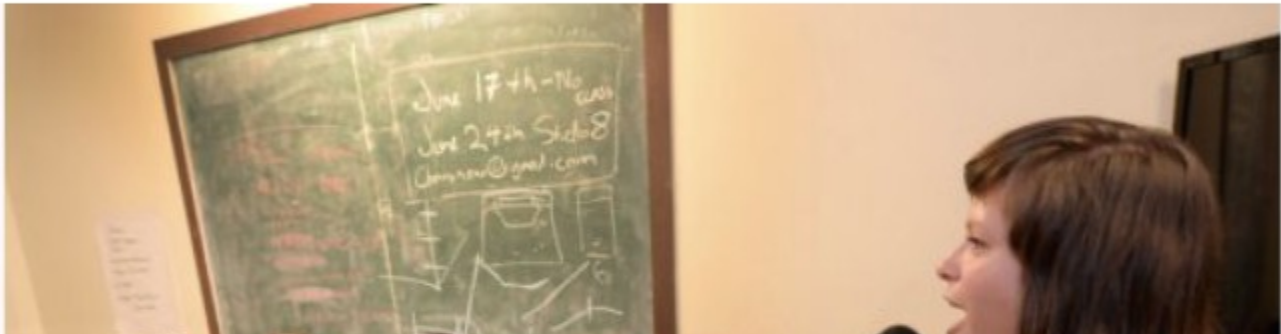


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By: Denis Grignon Freelance Entertainment writer, Published on Thu Jul 10 2014

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Just ask them and they'll fervently proselytize about it. Endlessly.

Judy Croon, however, won't.

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From a small conference room-cum-classroom, she's setting out to prove it. Croon is one of about six veterans of her industry who teaches Stand-Up 101, a seven-week course offered by Second City from its Byzantine cluster of tight, windowless workshop spaces in the basement of a downtown pharmacy.

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The nondescript, almost claustrophobic aura of Croon's classroom doesn't faze the dozen students as they file in. Some look as if they rushed here from their high-powered jobs on Bay Street. Others appear to have just woken up from a nap in High Park. A lot of copywriters and real estate agents, says Croon about the students she's had in recent years. And, according to 2012 graduate Michelle Christine, who holds a degree in environmental science and got laid off from her job in renewable energy before pursuing her dream, "a lot of people who seemed lost in their lives."

But there's no social hierarchy as they greet each other, enthusiastically catching up after a week apart, exchanging comic premises — even if they insist, when pressed, that, "no, we're just having casual conversation." That's the thing about standups of any level: eventually everything becomes potential comic fodder. "I saw a rapper today," one student muses, before adding a comic-like beat. "With a fanny pack!" Everyone roars at the juxtaposition and the seed for a stand-up bit.

One by one students take the stage — well, shimmy their way to the end of the boardroom table — to perform the material they've been honing for more than a month.

Their teacher, stopwatch in hand, stands vigilantly next to them as they deliver their goods. Often, but not exclusively, it's a lot of the standard standup fare: sex, bodily functions, smoking pot, drinking and dating.

"That's five minutes? Already? Seriously?" Sarah Walter, an American engineer working in Toronto, asks rhetorically when Croon holds up two fingers after a clever bit about English people and halitosis. Going long, students learn, is anathema to everyone from club owners to other comics on the bill.

“You’ve got the (performance) part down,” Croon tells Aidan, a drama teacher by day and clearly comfortable onstage. “Your challenge now is to find your (point of view).”

Every set is followed by everyone workshoping and fine-tuning the students’ acts, with Croon showing her comic mettle with the clearest and soundest advice. “Family Volvo” is funnier than just “Volvo,” for instance. With no hint of uneasiness, Croon, whose own act is very corporate-friendly, instructs a female student, “You should move the masturbation joke to later in your set.”

Says student Colin Sharpe, “(Judy) doesn’t try to shoehorn her own style into her teaching. She’s the ideal person to teach this course.”

There’s a positive, overly encouraging classroom atmosphere that, at times, feels as if it’s bordering on Pollyanna with everyone always laughing hard and heaping praise on bits that they’ve already heard several times and are still works in progress.

But Croon, who also does motivational speeches and adopts some of the nurturing principles she learned with Toastmasters, explains, “After 25 years, I’ve seen how the (standup) industry can be a negative place . . . and I know how vulnerable any student — or new comic — can be. There’s enough negativity outside the classroom.”

The Stand-Up 101 course isn’t just about perfecting set-ups, segues and punchlines. Around the corner from Croon’s class, Ted Bisailon is teaching his students the finer points of dealing with distractions from the stage — loud dishwashers, glassware falling off a tray — and how to (politely) treat the club’s staff. “Comedy is secondary to selling food and booze,” he reminds them. “And (comedians) can be replaced.”

The class wraps up with Croon emceeding a Sunday afternoon show at the Absolute Comedy club, in front of a real audience — sort of. It's mostly friends and family in attendance but, for that newbies' first performance, support is more important than scrutiny, stresses Croon and her teaching cohorts.

There's some clever, if not wholly developed, material about Noah's Ark, a mother buying her daughter's thongs, the unfair ranking of Third World countries.

Ben, who sounds a lot like NPR's Ira Glass, tells the audience he grew up in wealthy Westchester County. "So I have a natural fear of the poor."

He's followed by a student who opens with a joke that involves the C-word and it goes from there. And goes some more. Some of the audience laughs loud. Some are silent. A few squirm in their seats.

The show closes with its strongest act — pure coincidence, since everyone drew names for spots in the lineup. "I don't like ketchup," deadpans Colin Sharpe, whose sharp writing belies his short tenure in standup. "It's just a misrepresentation of tomatoes." The crowd cheers. Sharpe, already an established sketch comic, has found his standup voice.

Croon was surprised at how few of her students want to pursue standup as a career. "They're really just looking to improve their presentation skills . . . to think faster on their feet." Sarah Walter, for instance, has designs on eventually returning home to the U.S. to pursue politics.

But others, such as Michelle Christine, "caught the bug" after being inspired by her teacher, respected comic Evan Carter. The twenty-something woman immediately immersed herself in the local scene, doing as many as 30 open mics a month and producing her own live shows.

It hasn't always been as embracing and nurturing as the classroom, she concedes, citing one emcee who denigrated her onstage then followed that up with even more disturbingly mean, personal insults when she confronted him offstage. But rather than adopt the poison, back-stabbing mood that permeates many (some would argue most) comedy green rooms, Christine went with what she knows best. When she started her own open mic at The Ossington, "I just brought the same positive atmosphere from the Second City course to my room."

More info on Stand-Up 101 at secondcity.com. Denis Grignon is a 25-year veteran of standup comedy who never pursued formal training. On many nights, he wonders if he should have.