

TELEVISION | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

A Stand-Up Joke Is Born

By JASON ZINOMAN MARCH 5, 2012

The night after Christmas, the comedian Myq Kaplan did something most people would find terrifying. He told around 20 minutes of new jokes to a packed audience.

“You’re supposed to lay down your coat for a lady: that was a thing,” he said, speaking rapidly at the Broadway Comedy Club in Midtown Manhattan. “If there was a puddle, and a lady was like, ‘I don’t want to walk across a puddle,’ well, let me put my jacket down, because the bottom of your shoe is more important than my whole jacket.”

Despite earning a decent laugh, this was a work in progress: wordy and a bit imprecise. An hour later at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theater, his fourth gig that night, he refined the joke, more patiently establishing the framework as a comparison between chivalry past and present, adding a crisper point of view.

“No one sees a guy with a dirty jacket and says, ‘Gentleman,’ ” he said. “They’re like, ‘Homeless man.’ ” Louder laugh.

Mr. Kaplan saw potential, later describing the chivalry joke as his favorite new one. Walking backstage, he chatted with Louis C. K., whom he opened for earlier that year. Mr. Kaplan, 33, watched him try out raw material. Afterward, he said it was inspiring to see a comic at the top of his field working through new jokes in a basement theater around midnight. “We all have to do this,” he said.

The most underestimated quality of successful stand-up comedians is how hard-working they are, which became clear as this joke evolved over two months. Stand-up is the rare form that usually requires test driving in public. Myq (pronounced Mike) Kaplan, a respected regular at the Comedy Cellar in Greenwich Village, has since tried variations of his chivalry joke at about 80 performances. Almost every time, he tapes it, studies the results and jots down new ideas. That's the job, he said, one he can't imagine ever not doing.

Slight, with glasses, and typically wearing a rumpled sweatshirt, Mr. Kaplan favors intricate and highly verbal jokes. He's turned an anagram into a punch line (Spider-Man = PS ... I'm a nerd). A characteristic bit follows the logic of something to such an extreme that it becomes illogical. The chivalry joke started as an observation about an outmoded convention but evolved into something far more bizarre.

With jokes every word matters. So Mr. Kaplan's first breakthrough was three days later onstage at the Comedy Studio in Boston, where on the spot he changed "bottom of your shoe" to "lady feet-bottoms." He liked the sound. When he ran the entire joke by Josh Gondelman, a comic who often gives him feedback on new material, the verdict via e-mail was decisive: "Feet-bottoms is funny!"

Finding a better word for jacket proved more difficult. He tried "whole-upper-body clothing," then "man's upper half," until settling on "man torso" or "torso." "I like 'torso' because it's common and uncommon," Mr. Kaplan said. "People know what it means but don't use it often."

The first week is arguably the most creative in the life of a joke. For Mr. Kaplan it's all about generating ideas. What could explain this jacket convention? Maybe, he speculated, jackets were once very cheap and, as he would later say onstage, "men wore seven coats out, hoping it wasn't an eight-puddle day." He also decided that the modern equivalent was leaving the toilet seat down.

All these ideas were transformed into jokes as the bit expanded. Setups shrank. Punch lines multiplied. The jacket over the puddle soon became one of several examples of chivalry that began with his pantomiming opening a door after asking the audience: "Does it detract from chivalry if, when opening a car door for a lady, I

say, ‘Chivaaalry!’ ” He dragged out the last word in the self-satisfied voice of a magician introducing his assistant. A coarse joke about chivalry during sex replaced the homeless-man line. “It had a more powerful impact,” Mr. Kaplan said.

By early January Mr. Kaplan’s rhythm became more assured and moseying, lingering on pauses, finding extra laughs between punch lines. His typical stage pose — leaning back, his free hand placed gently on his stomach as if he were pregnant — became looser, adding touches of showmanship.

It didn’t matter where he performed (clubs, restaurants, even a hostel), chivalry always worked. The focus now was on getting the right laughs. It was important, he thought, to get a big one right at the start with his car-door opening, and in paring it down, he turned a question (“Does it detract from chivalry”) into a statement. Later, he brought back the question. Laughter marginally improved.

Mr. Kaplan thought the jokes were ready for television, so he sent a tape to the booker for “Conan,” a late-night show on TBS that he had been on before. The response was encouraging but not conclusive. The booker, J. P. Buck, gave him notes — some positive, others negative — but was less interested in chivalry and passed on several jokes.

So Mr. Kaplan regrouped, cutting down chivalry jokes (including the car door) and focusing on one bit that Mr. Buck said might be something “eventually.” The night after he heard from Mr. Buck, he told this joke:

“I always leave clothes on the floor. My girlfriend was like, ‘Why do you do that?’ There’s gross stuff under there. I am being chivalrous.”

The joke was less about an outmoded convention than about a sendup of himself. His tone grew more sober, less playful. There’s little room for bantering with the crowd on TV.

With “Conan” in his sights, he sent the show a tape of developing jokes every week until last month, when he received the invitation. Mr. Kaplan sounded a touch anxious the night before his appearance, still weighing whether to try a joke about lesbian etiquette that didn’t work in a club. (He didn’t.)

As is typical for television stand-up, his delivery on the show was slower than usual. His chivalry joke was sharpened into a skewed, punchy quip. “I’ve never thrown my jacket down on a puddle or anything, but I do leave clothing all over my apartment floor,” he said flatly. “Women come over and say, What’s this? I say: Chivaaaalry!”

The joke had come a long way. In using the magician’s voice and swinging his arm, he smuggled in elements of the cut car-door joke, and when he told it in his live set, which still featured the line, it worked as a nod to the earlier joke. Here, the joke was taut, off kilter, silly. The audience laughed. The host, Conan O’Brien, complimented his set during a commercial.

Looking back at the joke’s various incarnations, Mr. Kaplan said it was heartening to see improvement. Yet nothing was more fun than the first time. “When you introduce a joke into the world, and the audience laughs,” he said, “it’s the most invigorating, thrilling thing.”

Still, every night is a new audience, and partly to keep his show fresh, he keeps tinkering with the chivalry bit. He’s happy with the joke he told on “Conan,” but he doesn’t rule out changing it.

“No joke,” he said, “is ever finished.”

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