

# THE COMEDY GAZELLE





# ABOUT THE GAZELLE

When I first moved to Chicago, I was immediately struck by the level of talent in the scene. "Fuck, she's good," I thought as I watched Kristen Toomey annihilate a sold out Laugh Factory. *Why haven't I heard of her before?*

It's a question I come back to often, and a major problem here. The city's bursting with household-name-level talent, but unless you're in the midst of it, it can pass you by.

That's why I started The Comedy Gazelle — to bring outsiders into the heart of Chicago comedy, and to share knowledge that can hopefully make the scene that much stronger. It was also the pandemic and I had shit else to do.

Thanks for your support!

— Jerry

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# INTERVIEW: BRIAN HICKS

*Brian Hicks (@funnybrianhicks) is the General Manager of Zanies Chicago and has been performing standup for over 25 years, with a Dry Bar special approaching 1M Views on YouTube. We discuss working your way into a club, his hosting preferences, emailing for dates, booking Dry Bar and corporate gigs, advice for frustrated comics, and more!*

**I saw you just taught a hosting seminar at Zanies Rosemont. For the people that couldn't attend, what advice would you give to comics that want to become better hosts or host at Zanies?**

We called it Hosting 101, but it was really a mix of best practices when going to a club or introducing yourself to a club. I started at Riddles Comedy Club 25 years ago when it was in Orland Park; I was a doorman, and then a bartender, and then I was a floor manager there before I did comedy. So I got to see what it was like on that side, and it was a lot easier for me when I went to clubs because I knew that the comedy part was just part of it. So the seminar was about how every interaction you have with a club should be positive, and the more positive interactions you have, the better your chances are of getting booked. Because let's face it, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of comics in Chicago, and unless I know you well or have worked with you, you're really just another person passing through. I meet eight comics on every showcase show, so for me to remember everybody is difficult at times. So, positive interactions and staying away from the negative ones, because it only takes one bad interaction for someone to form an opinion on you. Which probably isn't fair, but it is kind of how it is.

**I'm sure a lot of people have had some of those bad interactions and are like, "I'm no longer that person," or maybe they had a bad night. What are some things people can do to make up for a bad interaction?**

Yeah, it's tough. One of the examples I mentioned is that Zanies in Chicago is a small club, and when the show is going on, people come in through the back door. They'll knock, and someone — a barback, a server, or the manager — will open it up. And so many times, Jerry, I have comics that are like, "I'm a comic," and then they just try to walk in. And I'm like, "Well, what's your name?" And then they look at me like, "What do you need my name for?" And I go, "Well, okay, let's start. I'm



Brian." And then they go, "Oh, you're Brian!" And I go, "No, no, it's too late for that. I just want to know what your name is now." And so, it's little things like that. When you go to a club, introduce yourself. I think that's the best thing that you can do. Say, "Hey, I know you're busy cause you're running a show, but hey, my name's Jerry. I just wanted to say hi, I'm a comic, and I love the club." That's a perfect interaction. You haven't asked for anything. I'm like, "Oh, that guy came up, he was friendly. He didn't ask me for anything." Then the next time you come up, I'll be like, "Oh, that's that nice guy, Jerry. I remember." And then I think that's the time where you're like, "Hey, if you have any spots open, I would love to get on some time." I was a comedian for years, and I understand you always want to do the best rooms and get on stage whenever you can, but I feel like you need to read the room and know that there's a time to ask for things and there's a time to make a good impression.

**And say you get your foot in the door — you have that positive interaction and you end up on a showcase. What can somebody do to continue in the right direction? How do you take that opportunity and really ingrain yourself into the club?**

I'll start by saying if you do get on a showcase and you don't necessarily do well, I'm not a one show person, like, "Oh, that guy didn't do well. He's not

coming back.” I came to Zanies years ago and I did a showcase there and it's an intimidating club; it's not an easy room to play. So I get all the factors that are involved. You're nervous, it's your first time, you're auditioning for somebody — there's a lot of different things. So whether you do well or not on that first showcase, my recommendation is going back to what I stated about the positive interactions. Even afterwards, say, “Hey, thanks a lot for having me,” on your way out the door, whether you did good or bad. And then the next day, “Hey, I really do appreciate the time. Thanks for having me on.” And leave it at that. Don't be like, “Hey, I'd love to get on another showcase,” because it's a timing thing at that point. We both know that you didn't have the best set. And I'm not going to hold that against you, and I'm not going to not give you another opportunity. Just kind of be like, “Hey, I really enjoyed the time. If anything comes up...” that's kind of an easy, slow play into it. But once again, it's another positive interaction. You're saying thank you when you leave, then you're saying thank you again. I don't respond to those emails all the time, but I get them all. I read all the emails, I read all the messages. So when you do send a thank you email, it goes a long way on the personal part of it, rather than just the business side of it.

**When you're showcasing at Zanies or any big club, you obviously want to do your best material. Do you judge people if they do the same material you've heard before? Are you looking to hear something new?**

If somebody does a showcase for the first time and they do eight minutes and this is their eight minutes, and they don't do that well, like I said, I'm not judging them based off that. If they come back and they do that same eight minutes and it kills, I kind of put it together in my head. I think you should always just do your best material, especially if you're auditioning. Because if you're auditioning, it means you're not in yet. So why are you going to try new material if you're not even in yet? Do your best tried and true material. Get in. If you've been playing the club for three years and you're doing the same jokes that you did three years ago for a host set or a feature set, then I'm like, “Hey, you got any other material?” But I think that initially you need to get in. And if you need to do your best material to do it, you need to do it. Don't be worried about changing it up just because I saw you one time. You'd be amazed at how often people don't catch everything that you say, or they really, really enjoy what you're doing and they want to hear a joke again. There was a comedian

when I was growing up, Jimmy Pardo, who was just incredibly funny. One of the funniest comedians ever. He used to be a house emcee at Riddles, and I pretty much knew Jimmy's whole act because I'd seen him so many times. I didn't care. I thought he was so incredibly funny, I just wanted to see it again and see every joke that I knew.

**When I first hosted at Zanies, you told me you prefer clean hosts. Can you talk about that and what you look for in a host?**

A lot of people are really high on a high energy host that comes out and is kind of aggressive, kind of loud. It works a good percentage of the time, but I feel like going up there with whatever your energy is and just controlling the room is just as powerful. If you know how to control the stage and the room, you can walk up there as casual as can be and take control of everything. I prefer clean hosts because you're the start of the show, and at that point the show can really go in any direction. If you come out of the box extremely dirty, and there's another comedian going up who's not quite as dirty, it's difficult for that person to follow someone who's extremely dirty and high energy. I'm not saying the second comedian isn't funny or the first comedian isn't funny; I just think that as the host, it's your job to set the tone for the show and make sure it goes in the right direction. If you've taken on the position of hosting for the weekend, and you are extremely dirty, and you know that the next person — or even the headliner — isn't, I feel like it's your job, as funny as you are, as dirty as you can be, to be able to pull that back a little bit and do what you got hired to do, and that's host the show and run the show from start to finish.

**I remember being nervous because you told me to be clean. I was like, “If I swear, am I screwed?” How strict are you on some of your standards?**

So I mentioned this at the seminar. If I get an audition tape and the first thing is, "How the fuck is everybody doing?" I've already checked out of that tape. If you can't even get control of the room without just swearing at people within the first 10 seconds, I feel like there's no creativity. I know some of the audition tapes I get are from bars and rough rooms, but you should still be able to go up there and get their attention without having to swear right out of the box. I'm not against swearing at all, but I think if you're hosting, maybe don't drop the f-bomb five, ten times in your hosting set. I just don't think it's necessary. You need to understand why you're there. You're hosting the show, and whatever you decide, that's the direction that the show goes. The best piece of advice I ever got from a comedian was "clean it up where you can." I could use this word for this joke and it works great, but maybe I can be a little more creative and I can use another word, which doesn't seem as harsh, but gets the point across the same way. Now I've cleaned it up a little bit and made it presentable for everybody rather than 50% or 25% of the room.

**I feel like as comics we all have our different tastes, but when you're booking, how are you able to set that aside and be like, "Even if this comic isn't for me, I do recognize that they are funny and that a lot of other people would like them?"**

Yeah, I think I don't get as much credit for that because I really do have my type of comic that I like. But I do see some people that might not be my cup of tea, but I really do have to focus on what's for the better of everybody, right? Maybe I don't care for that person, but if they get a great crowd reaction and the crowd likes them, I go, "Maybe I'm a little off on this." That one's a little bit tricky, but I really try to keep that in the back of my mind whenever I'm trying to evaluate comics.

**How are you able to balance bringing in new talent and rewarding young comics for working hard, while also still booking the reliable acts that you can trust?**

It's not a perfect science, but everybody wants to feel like they're working towards something. So usually we'll start with the positive interactions. And then once you go from there, then we go on a showcase and we'll do a couple of showcases if you're doing well, then I'm like, "Yeah, let's do another showcase." Everybody wants to grow, and I understand it cause I was the same way. So then they're like, "Hey, how do I do more?" And then I'm like, "Well, let's host a showcase." You still get to do your material, but now we get to see you as a host. And then

as you kind of keep progressing and maybe host a one off for a headliner show, and then you kind of work into the role of hosting on a weekend or featuring on a weekend, depending on where you're at in comedy. It can't be for everybody, but that's kind of the trajectory. If I see somebody who I'm like, "Oh, I think they're working hard at it and they're doing all the right things and still writing material and showing up and being professional and showing interest in wanting to do more." That's the other thing — I can't offer something to somebody if they don't want something, right? So they have to express to me, "Hey, I'm interested in doing a little bit more or maybe hosting a show." And I love hearing it. I wish I had 50 more opportunities a year for somebody to come in and host a show. There's so many comics and so few opportunities. That's what I like about the showcase shows. We're known as a headliner room and we've only started to do the showcases really after the pandemic. The former management used to do them to audition people, but it would happen once every four months. They'd pull a Monday out and do eight comics and that was your big shot; those were the showcases that I was involved in and that was it. There were a couple of rules: show up 30 minutes before the show, bring a headshot and a bio with you, and be Tonight Show clean. And then if there were eight people on the show, inevitably two people were late, two people didn't bring their headshot or their bio, and two people were dirty as hell. So it left two people, and if you're even a little bit funny, which I think is the group I fell in, it was like, "Okay, I can work with this guy."

**"YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND WHY YOU'RE THERE. YOU'RE HOSTING THE SHOW, AND WHATEVER YOU DECIDE, THAT'S THE DIRECTION THAT THE SHOW GOES."**



**Yeah, there are a lot of comics that are super funny and have all the talent in the world, but might not be the most professional. Do you still try to work with those people, or are you just like, "Sorry, professionalism is a priority for me?"**

My boss told me something that I found fascinating about me, and it was staring me in the face the whole time. She said, "Brian, you get upset at somebody if they don't do things like you would do it." And I thought about it and I go, "That's the most truthful thing that I've ever heard about myself." I really do have a hard time. Like I always considered myself professional, right? I showed up, I followed the rules, and I was a little bit funny. I'm like, "We just asked you to show up on time. How'd you not?" If I struggle with one thing, Jerry, that's probably it. It's a lot easier for me to pass somebody who's not my style of comedy than it is for me to look at somebody who's not professional about it and give them something over someone that's every bit professional and shows up and does everything right. Why am I giving you an opportunity and not him? I do struggle with that a little bit.

**This might save you some inbox space: how much emailing is too much emailing? What's a good amount to check in for dates?**

I think that if you're emailing every single week that could be a little much. Three weeks to a month is probably perfect, unless something's changed. If you send your avails and then you booked a couple of things, maybe in two weeks you say, "Hey, I had some changes in my avails, here's my new updates." You definitely want to stay in front of people for sure. Because out of sight, out of mind. It's a real thing. But you also don't want to be so annoying where you're turning people off.

**Do you ever want to get up and perform at Zanies, or how separate are the two for you?**

When I'm managing there, it's pretty much business. I rarely ever have an inkling to get up on stage at Zanies in Chicago. I performed there a lot over the years. In all honesty, Jerry, I never did exceptionally well there. I always did okay; I was always serviceable and I would do house emcee months. And I had good shows, but I never felt like that was my favorite room of all time. It's a tough room to play. When you think about it, it's the city, it's Chicago. You have people from the city; you have people from the suburbs; you have people from out of state who are visiting the city; you have people from out of the country that are visiting the city. It's hard to make every one of those come together on a joke. So it's a tough room to play. I've been up a couple times since I've been



working there, just a showcase and I've opened up a couple podcast shows. But other than that, I kind of keep it separate.

**I've heard about the house emcee and it sounds like an older practice. Can you talk about that and why it went away? I know Pat McGann did it for a while at Zanies.**

Yeah, he did at least six months. So the house emcee was kind of back in the day when there weren't a lot of special events and they would do one headlining comedian Tuesday through Sunday. Unless they did have a special event, it was really four comics a month, four headliners a month, four different feature acts, and then there'd be one house emcee, and he'd be able to host all the shows. It was a little easier to do back then because there wasn't a lot of variety, like you knew you had Jake Johanssen, you had Uncle Larry, maybe Vince Maranto or Bill Burr. There wasn't a lot of variety, where now we can do five or six different headliners in one week. And you know, a lot of comics like to bring their own openers with them at this point. And I think that to be versatile enough to go up and host for six different headliners – not just for one week, but four times in one month – you'd have to be the most likable, versatile comedian of all time to be able to do that.

**Yeah, well, then you get yourself a Pat McGann.**

That's what it is. Maybe that's what we created; he's incredible. And honestly, when you did the house emcee, it was great, Jerry. You could bring a bit or two there on Tuesday, and you'd have it polished by Sunday when you left. Cause you have nine opportunities to work it out, figure out what you're doing right, what you're doing wrong, what direction you want to go with it, what voice inflections. It was great for being able to write material and work out bits and have them completed. They could go right into your act after a week, and it was usually 36 shows a month.

**That's a dream.**

Well, it was a dream if you lived across the street from Zanies, but I lived in the suburbs. It was a 45 minute commute each way. And I was working my full time job. I remember getting up at seven o'clock, going to work, leaving, going downtown, and being there for the 8:30 show. Then you got to stick around until the end of it, which is 10 o'clock. And then I had to drive home and do it all over six more times. But from a comedy standpoint, it was incredible, and it was a great way to be able to get comfortable in a room. Like I said, I didn't always have great sets at Zanies, but I was extremely comfortable there. After a month on the same stage, it's like your living room. You referred to Pat McGann – I did a showcase there, it was an audition probably for Letterman or something, and there were eight or nine comics and they drew a number and I had like spot number three. And I'm like, "This is great. Three's great!" And, well, Pat McGann went up second and he'd been house emceeing there for months. And I just remember sitting on the side of the room, I'm like, "I can't do this. I can't go up after this guy!" He was just so comfortable. And it was rough, it was rough.

**I wanted to ask you about your Dry Bar special. I saw you're nearing a million views.**

I keep pushing. That seems to be the milestone.

**I know Dry Bar's a huge goal for a lot of comics. Can you walk me through how you ended up getting that recorded?**

That's a pretty interesting story. A comedian friend of mine, Michael Palascak, who I've known for pretty much his whole comedy career, got signed on to do Dry Bar. He reached out to me, he goes, "Hey, I'm doing Dry Bar this date. They're looking for other comics. I gave him your name if you want to reach out to the guy." So I emailed him and he gave me the date and I couldn't do that date, but I said, "Hey, I'm available for these other couple of

dates," not thinking it was going to ever go anywhere. And then he responded, "How about this date?" I said, "Yeah, I could do that date." And then he goes, "Great." Then that was it. And all of this happened within a matter of about 10 minutes. And then I go, "I don't know if I got this because it was very easy." I go, "That's it? That's my confirmation for getting Dry Bar?" Cause it seems like a bigger deal than that. Maybe a day or two went by and I sent another email. I go, "Hey, I just want to confirm that this is real." And he goes, "Yeah I got so and so on. They're going to forward you all the information." In 20 plus years of doing comedy, it was probably the easiest gig I ever got. The recommendation helped for sure, so I've actually since referred a few other comics the same way. And most of them got it as well.

**Have you gotten a lot of corporate gigs from that Dry Bar special?**

Yeah, it definitely has helped. It's a great quality clip and they break it down into smaller clips for you, so I'm able to put a couple of those on my website and send the clip to some of the corporate producers out there. I have some credits as well; I toured with Michael Carbonaro from The Carbonaro Effect for six years, and he was always a family friendly show. And I think that also helps with the corporate side of it because anytime you talk corporate, they're always concerned with content friendly. So between those couple of things, it has definitely helped get some more of those higher paying gigs.

**Do you have any advice for some comics that might have clean material, but don't have an in into the corporate world yet? How can they start doing some of those gigs?**

I think the first thing is marketing yourself towards it. My big thing years ago was having a professional-looking website, especially from a corporate standpoint. I don't know how necessary

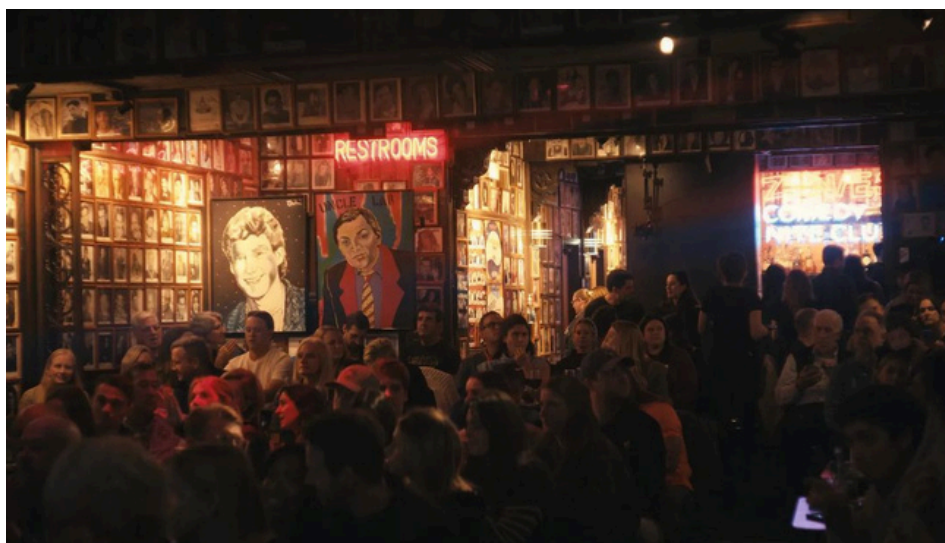
it really is now with social media and everything, but I always thought having a website was important. And being able to put the right content on there, and then listing yourself as a corporate comedian if you really do truly believe you are a corporate comedian. I feel like there's a lot of people out there who think that they are, but then they get in front of a room full of stuffy suits at 2:00pm on a Monday afternoon and they realize, "Oh, I can't do this." So if you really are capable of doing it, then you have to market yourself as a corporate comedian. That's definitely something that should be in your bio or website.

**Before we go, what advice would you give to a comic that is frustrated with where they're at in the Chicago scene? Any words of wisdom for that person?**

I think it's easy to get frustrated nowadays for a couple of reasons. No matter how hard you're working or how well you're doing, with social media there's so much coming at you and you are visible to everybody else's accomplishments and everybody else's wins. You could be killing it, but you're still looking at these other people. You're like, "I feel like I'm doing well, but I'm not doing that." Well, I think you have to understand that nobody's posting the struggles or the hardships that they're going through to get to where they're at. Everybody's working hard in their own way. You gotta keep plugging away. And you have to love what you're doing. You have to love the journey, because if you're not loving the journey of what you're doing, then you can't make it to the end. You probably don't even know what the end is right now. So if you don't know what the end is, then you have to enjoy what you're doing at this time. And if you don't enjoy what you're doing at this time, then it doesn't really make a lot of sense for you. But if you're having fun on stage, not too many audiences aren't having fun with you.

**I love that. Just enjoy the journey, enjoy where you're at.**

Don't take any show for granted. We forget what we do is an honor to be able to do. It's a treat, it's a privilege. You get to make people laugh. I mean, think about telling your friend a joke and he laughs. Now do that in your room full of a hundred people. You made a hundred people laugh at something you created. I mean, what better gig is there? Whether you're getting paid for it or not, it's a feeling inside. I think the money and all that other stuff will come as long as you're true to yourself and you're having fun doing it. And that's what we all got into it to do. We got into it because we went up a couple of times and it was fun for us. So I think people have to remember why they got into it and continue on with that.





# VOUCH

THE COMEDY GAZELLE PRESENTS



*Hosted by*  
BRANDON KIEFFER

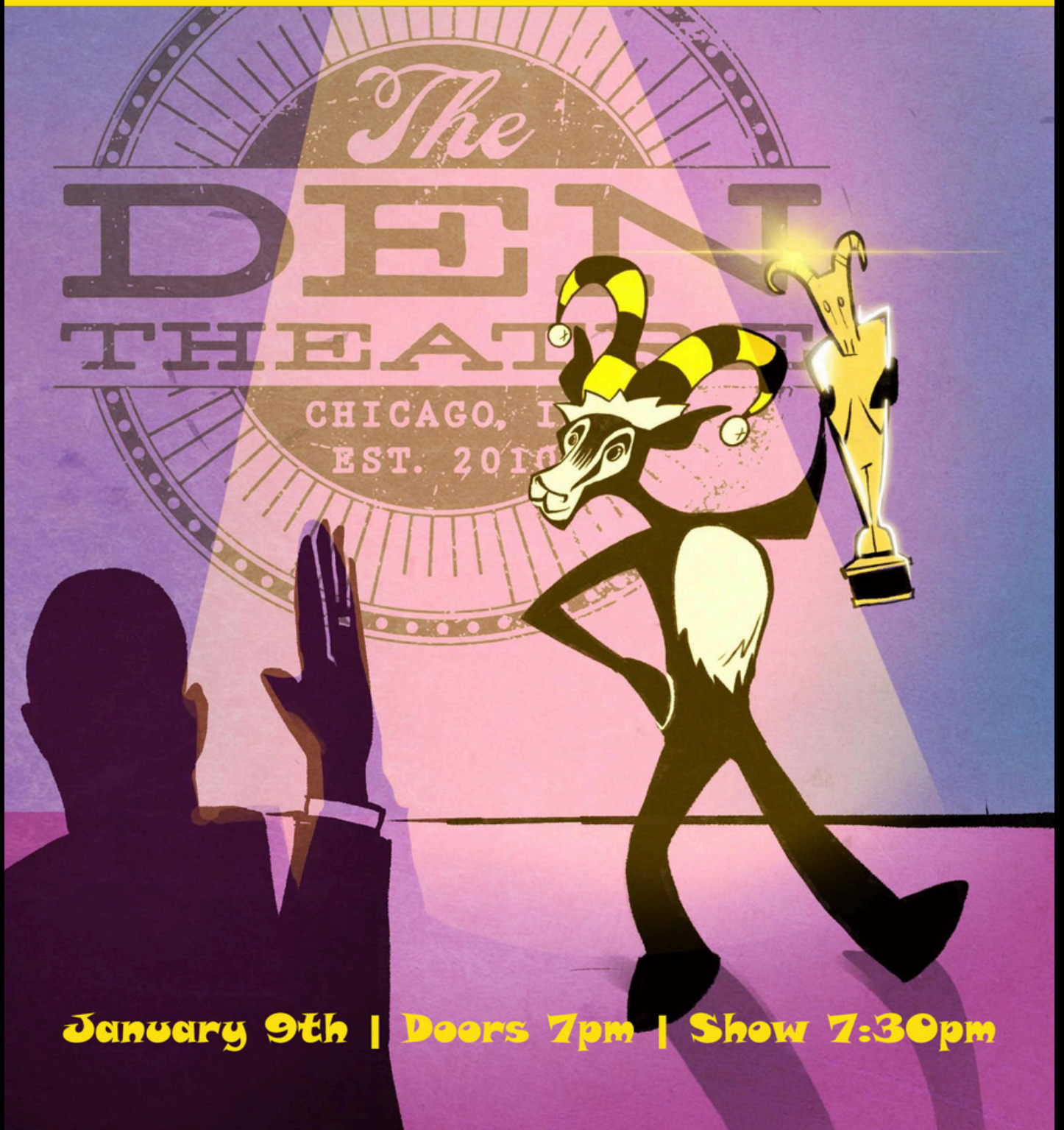
*Featuring*  
HAJI OUTLAW, MICHAEL BUSSLER, JAMAAL SANDERS,  
REY TANG, THE POWERFUL COMEDY, NICK EMEKA

Laugh Factory | 8:00pm | 11/27/24



The Comedy Gazelle & The Den Theatre Present

# 2024 GAZELLIES



January 9th | Doors 7pm | Show 7:30pm

# Comedians Recognizing Comedians

## **JON MOORE**

Recently transplanted from Indiana, Jon is on his grind trying to carve out a place for himself in Chicago at a pace that is impressive and competitive, hitting multiple mics in a night. He's an excellent writer, a joke machine.

## **KYRIE DA COMIC**

On top of being a bright light in whatever room he enters, he's hilarious and does a great job producing a quality show.

## **JAMES NAJJAR**

One of the hardest working guys on the scene, always willing to give a hand. Always looking for a stage and producing!!

## **GRACE BAHLER**

Grace creates and produces so many beautiful silly spaces for comics and her shows make me love doing comedy.

## **CHELSEA GILL**

She only started doing comedy 2 months ago and is already killing it and co hosting an open mic.

## **RON BLOOM**

Ron Bloom is an amazing producer, friend and comic! If you ever looking for stage time Ron Bloom is the guy to hit up!

## **REBECCA JAFFE**

She is absolutely destroying it in roast battles and she brings this unique creativity to her own stand up.



**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?  
WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

**DM US @COMEDYGAZELLE**

