

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.

Thank you for your support!

— Jerry

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INTERVIEW: K.P. ANDERSON

K.P. Anderson is an executive producer, showrunner, writer and standup best known for The Soup, The Joel McHale Show, Norm Macdonald Has a Show, The Wayne Brady Show, Last Comic Standing, Politically Incorrect, and more. After meeting at the Asheville Comedy Festival, we reconnected to discuss his path into the industry, building a writer's room, submitting packets, advice from Bill Hicks, working with Norm, and more.

We talked about this in Asheville, but can you give a brief overview of how you went from college age standup to where you are now as an executive producer?

Yeah, so I started doing stand up in college in Minneapolis. After my first open mic, Scott Hanson, the guy who ran the comedy clubs up there, made me a house emcee at one of his clubs off of that performance. And then I pretty quickly started producing shows. I went, "Oh, great. I must be good at this." So I went to my hometown, Cambridge, Minnesota, and I was producing a show out of their American Legion hall once a month. Then I gave that room to Scott and his brother to book in exchange for more spots in Minneapolis and on the road. And so, by the time I graduated from college a year and a half later, I was on the road. I was going to class Monday and Tuesday, and then I was on the road Wednesday through Sunday performing. It was a time in the 90's that a lot of big name comics were emerging, whether it was Bill [Maher] or Ellen DeGeneres or Roseanne or Tim Allen, George Wallace, Larry Miller, Bill Hicks – a lot of them would come through Minneapolis and I happened to be the opening act, so I got to know a lot of them. The late Robert Schimmel loved my writing and was like, "I'm taking you on the road and we're going to teach you how to become a fucking crazy writer." And so, I'd go on the road with Schimmel and all we'd do is sit in a hotel and write, write, write, for hours on end. We'd write during the day with coffee, we'd write at night after the show. We'd just write constantly. So pretty quickly out of college, I wound up moving to LA.

That sounds so cool as a young comic.

Yeah, it was just nonstop writing. Bill and people like Bill kept telling me, "Look, your stand up is great, but



your writing is really a difference maker. Maybe that's a lane you should consider." But I sort of flamed out in LA once I went there. I didn't get any writing jobs. I got *An Evening at the Improv* and a couple of TV shows, and I was a house emcee at The Improv with Fallon at the time, but I couldn't really get further. After maybe two years, I'd gone broke. I had to sell my car; I sold everything to pay bills. I went back to Minneapolis and threw what shit I had left in my brother's basement and just went on the road for another year. I was like, "I got to get funnier." And through that year, [manager] Judy Marmel came and saw me, signed me, and got me into Montreal and New Faces. So, I moved back to LA, and I started getting more attention. People like Bill [Maher] started giving me opportunities to do audience warm up and then jobs. And along the way, one of the things that I realized through Bill and *Politically Incorrect* was that I didn't want to just write those five jokes at the top of the show. I wanted to do more and be more involved. I realized that I like doing stand up, but performance doesn't motivate me as much as being an important part of a good idea coming together. And so, that naturally gravitated me towards producing. First, my growth was towards head writer, then once I got that, I moved over to showrunner, and then over to supervising producer. But I think all along the way, it was always about, "How

do I keep picking up things that need to be done around here? How do I learn more about how this whole production comes together?"

Did you feel your dream shift from wanting to be a comedian to wanting to be a writer or showrunner? Or were you going down the writer path while part of you still wanted to be a standup?

There's a part of me that still loves doing standup, to this day, which is why I was in Asheville. Standup is such its own great thing. You get to present it the way that you and only you want to present it, and the feedback is immediate. When you do this other stuff all the time and you're constantly in negotiation over what that creative is going to be, there's headaches along the way. Everything you write, think, and put out there gets modified, and it takes much longer to get it in front of someone to see if they laugh at it. So, standup serves its own purpose for me; it's a fantastic outlet and I get to live a couple of dreams is what it boils down to. But my advice is that there's no shame in whatever motivates you towards moving into this space. If being famous is important to you, then figure out how to capture your uniqueness and learn to manipulate it to a point that others pay attention to it. Like, that's okay. But you gotta know why you're in the game.

I think it's so interesting how many different paths there are in comedy. There's so many different ways that you can "make it."

There's so many different ways of going about it, and most of the great voices out there tend to grow on their own, stubbornly, and against the advice of every other person who tries to help them over time. I love to talk about career, but there is a certain amount of it you just have to figure out. Bill Hicks said to me a hundred years ago when I was coming up and I was like, "Hey, am I funny?" — I opened for him in Minneapolis — and he was like, "Yeah, you're funny enough." But he goes, "But fuck, man, you just gotta get out there and fucking get your heart broken and get your shit stolen. And don't call your mom and come home a man. What the fuck?" And walked away from me. Probably the best advice anybody's ever given me in my life. It had nothing to do with "here's how to do this." It was, "Stop trying to imitate me and go live your own life and get your own fucking voice."

How important is it for you to get a unique voice like that in a writer's room? Or do you not necessarily care because you're trying to fit a

certain mold for a show?

That's a really good question. There's a whole bunch to room chemistry and how you put a room together. Let's go with *The Soup*, since that's the one that people know that I made with Joel McHale. We did that for 12 years and we had a writing staff that changed very little over the course of those 12 years. I think I had five spots to give when I took over the show after like six episodes. They wanted to clean house on the writing staff and told me I could keep one person from the prior writing staff and then had to build something new. So I took over the job and I had one guy who I knew very well from Minneapolis, Greg Fidler. He and I came up together as standups and he had written for Letterman and Leno and had a good track record of late night stuff, so he was my immediate number two. I had a guy, Lee Farber, who had worked with me on *The Wayne Brady Show*, and I knew that Lee was fast, funny, into pop culture and super weird and had a very "Conan-y" sense, which Joel did as well. And then Tess Rafferty, who hadn't had a job yet, but she was a constant, always writing, always writing, always writing type person. And then the one person that I kept was this guy, Dominic ["Nick"] DeLeo, which is where the answer to your question lies. When I read all the stuff from the writers, he was the guy where I was like, "Oh shit, I could never write the jokes that this guy writes; he's so weird." Nick was by far our weirdest writer; he was like a human ricochet thought-wise. He would go in directions that you never could predict. And I didn't know it, but when I said he was the one I wanted to keep, Joel was like, "Thank god, he was my best friend since growing up." So Nick stuck around and he and Joel had a special kind of magic that certainly helped the room. One of the things that I learned from all the shows that led up to *The Soup* was that you need to get a defined voice for your show that fully reflects who's saying the words. You've

got to arm them with words they can't wait to say and sort of inspire them to want to do the material. A lot of time, the trick to that is coming up with things that sound like them, but are still surprising, even to them. I think that's the biggest thing most showrunners or head writers look for when they're building a staff. If it's a successful show and it's been on for a while, and we go out and say we want a packet from people, we're not looking for your brilliant, amazing, "here's how I would completely change your show" ideas. If we're still getting picked up, then we might just be good at this. The fact we're looking for a writer means that we either get to expand or someone's moving on, so the person that comes in needs to step in pretty quickly and feel like they write for the show. It's this magical combination of writing in a way that feels like the show would say it, but it's something that it hasn't said yet.

Yeah, I feel like a lot of standups would want to stand out and reinvent the wheel, but that's not what you're looking for.

Right. When you talk about writing in that kind of environment, comics make me want to put my head through a fucking wall. They drive me nuts. When Bill Maher gave me my first job, he literally looked across the table at me and went, "You could write a fucking book about getting on my nerves." Bill fired me twice. Comics are so used to being on an island; you are so used to being the writer, the producer, the director, the everything — especially now in the social media age, where you've got to cut your clips and send your crowd wrap out worldwide and all the shit you have to do — it makes you more and more insular. And then, when you get in that position and it's time to work as a team, you have no idea how to go about it. And the comics who never get the job are the ones who think that the job is easy. I've been in this business now for 35, 36 years and I've been a head writer or a showrunner or a development executive for 20 some odd years, so I've been around a minute, and comics will often go, "If standup stops paying the bills, I can always do what you do." Like, oh, can you? Oh, good! Good for you! Because I've noticed you haven't written a new fucking joke in four years, but you're gonna write ten a day now? 20, 30, 40? You're gonna do that?

That's something I heard from a writer; "Comics think it's so easy to get a writing job, but it's like, 'You're going to write for someone else? You don't even write for yourself.'"

Yeah, the way I got my job with Bill was I was an audience warmup guy on Politically Incorrect and we

knew each other from years of hanging out at clubs and stuff. He liked my voice and was like, "Oh, maybe that can work for me." But then, of course, I got to that job and all I wanted to do was write material for myself, as opposed to trying to learn how Bill manifested stuff. It took me a week and a half of getting my ass kicked to realize, "Oh, I've got to start writing jokes I think he would say." And then from there, I would still drive him fucking crazy because I was constantly trying to revamp a show that was already a massive success.

What advice would you give to a stand up that is trying to get their first writing job?

You've got to write every day, and I would do it for a while before you start submitting or looking for an agent. Learn the forms that you want to work in. Write spec scripts, write your own stories, write plays, write, write, write, and learn the craft of writing. In any writer's room, for everybody else that's in there, that's their dream. Getting on stage and doing standup isn't. In a competitive environment where you want to keep your job, you're up against people who are really, really, deeply into what it is they're doing. You have to be as knowledgeable about writing as they are, if you want to write for The Daily Show or Fallon or Colbert or SNL. You need to learn sketch, especially now when you've got the capacity to go shoot stuff on your own. You see who gets those opportunities at SNL: the people who are getting the opportunities to both write and perform on that show are already making a pretty significant dent somewhere out there with a large body of work. So, go practice the thing that you want to do and put it in front of the public in a situation that has smaller stakes than the show.

IN ANY WRITER'S ROOM, FOR EVERYBODY ELSE THAT'S IN THERE, THAT'S THEIR DREAM. GETTING ON STAGE AND DOING STANDUP ISN'T... YOU'RE UP AGAINST PEOPLE WHO ARE REALLY, REALLY, DEEPLY INTO WHAT IT IS THEY'RE DOING.

Say you have an agent and you put together a packet. How often would you say it will even get read, if it's put in front of a showrunner?

If it's coming through an agent as part of a request, it's going to get read. More often than not, most shows will go to the agents and put word out and get stuff back through them. I realize how frustrating that is for the people who want to get in and don't have an agent, but there's legality behind it. There's parallel development all the time, especially in the sketch world. I remember when *The Man Show* was hiring, everybody was convinced that their stuff was being stolen by the show. Like, they wrote the packet and didn't get the job, but then they saw a similar sketch and it's like, "Well, it's a show talking about men being men, with women. There's only so many roads you can go down with this thing." There's a little bit of that that goes on, but you also only have so much time, so you can't go out to the whole wide world and ask for it.

And how thoroughly are they read? If you lose someone's attention right away, do you end up in the trash? Or do they actually get read through fully?

I'm going to say it's pretty case by case. I very honestly — and I think my reputation would speak to this — but I very honestly try to give a full read to everything that's of reasonable length inside of what the request was. And I don't necessarily reach out to everybody that I didn't hire, but I do make myself available to answer questions where I can. I did this thing *When Nature Calls* with Helen Mirren for ABC, and I think we got 200 submissions for eight or so spots. I read all of them until I had narrowed it down to the 15 or 20 that I was sharing with the network and head writers. We did a blind submission to make sure that we had equity in hiring; we covered up the names on the packets, so we just got a numbered packet. You go, "Okay, these are my ten that I really think are great. Here's five more that I kind of liked." Everybody on the committee puts that together and you start to narrow it down. Then we read again and start to put something together, but you don't peel back the stickers until you've gone, "These are our eight."

That's smart.

It's a really good practice. But with that particular one, it turned out that when I peeled back those names, a lot of them that didn't get the job, but were very close, were people who had either written for me on shows before, were standups that I really knew and liked, or were somehow already on my radar. So, I made sure that I made a call to go, "Hey, your stuff was great. If we expand the room, maybe I can give you a better call down the road. But also, here's what I think might've dinged you on



this." So, you try to read everything. I will also tell you that sometimes you get stuff that's just not right and you know it from the get go. I will still read as deep as I can, just in case, but if it's a "nope" one page in, and they haven't turned it around two pages in, do I have to read this third page? No, because I'm already sitting on five submissions that are great for all three pages. I know I'm not hiring this person, so I'm moving on.

Got it. I feel like a lot of people that don't have their first writing job are like, "Well, what chance do I have when they have all their friends from past jobs that they can pull in?" But it sounds like there is still a chance.

Yeah, DEI had a lot to do with that. I mean, honestly, my *Soup* room was all white, one woman. By the time we got to *The Joel McHale Show*, we had moved past that and we had done the blind submission thing, and the room looked vastly different from what *The Soup* had been. I thought that the new voices that came along contributed in a big way to what made the show different and unique, and what made it an update of *The Soup*, and better for the time. And I do think that there's a lot of ham-fisted attempts at DEI that don't do a great job at making the product better. But this blind submission feels like a great way that it actually does, and you get something

that inspires you. I want people who write jokes that I wouldn't write myself. I can always just sit down and go do it myself, but you're going to get the show that I would have it be, rather than the one that inspires me to elevate it.

Earlier you mentioned that you gave Tess her first writing job. What was it that made you take a chance on her?

Prior to that time, my wife and I had been friends with Tess and her boyfriend, Chris, and she was constantly writing. Of all the standups we knew and hung out with, Tess was a monster pain in the ass. We never got to have weekend nights where you did something that wasn't show business related because Tess was always dragging people over to table read some fucking play she had written. She'd give us bottles of Two Buck Chuck and we'd all sit in her cramped apartment and read through stuff. I knew that I needed volume, volume, volume in order to figure out what this show was going to be, and I didn't have a lot to pay writers. I needed some people who were going to come in and work for less than a lot of money. So, I was able to sell Tess by going, "We'll start her out at a junior level." That changed pretty quickly, especially because she was the only woman on staff and it was a terrible idea to be paying the only woman less than all the men. I think that lasted like six weeks, and then it was like, "Oh, this is a very, very bad look." But I was able to just show the volume. I was able to go to Jay James, who ran E! Studios at the time, and go, "Look, not everything she writes is a home run, but look how much she writes. I promise you, she'll be reflected in the script because she just does way more than everybody else does."

What are some soft skills beyond just being funny that can make you an asset in the industry?

Look people in the eye. Be engaging. Be nice to people and ask them how they're doing. Comics, learn that there's other people in the room. Yes, by and large your circumstances professionally involve people wanting to know more about you than you wanting to know about them, but learn how to be in a conversation that you don't need to dominate. Talk to people. There was one guy at Asheville whose name I will not get into, but the dude was so very intent on being the alpha in every conversation and being like, "I'm going to tell everybody else how all this works." And my reaction to it every time was, "Great. Cool. Go ahead, tell me." And the whole time I'm just going, "This fucking guy, I'm never speaking to this asshole again." It wasn't even the arrogance, the arrogance you can deal with; it was the complete and utter lack of interest in anything but his own agenda. And

by the way, Jerry, you are the polar opposite of that. The second you and I started talking, I was like, "Oh, this is a good dude. I can hang out with this guy."

I'm glad. Thanks!

Be someone that people can hang out with, and look them in the eye. And by the way, also learn how to take a compliment. When someone gives you a compliment, don't go, "You think so?" or "No...!" Look someone in the eye and say, "Thank you. I worked really hard on it." Because you're validating their opinion of your work.

I haven't heard that before. That's really good advice.

Yeah, it makes me crazy. When I interview people, I really want to know what they're proud of. I want to know that they're going to be a little bit pushy to get their work seen, that they're going to deliver. Turning in is hard; it takes a little bit of courage early on to be like, "Okay, I'm done writing. You're going to read it and you're going to buy some of it." I want to know that someone actually feels like they belong in the space that they're in. And yeah, I take a little bit of offense when I tell someone that I think they're great and they go, "No...!" Well, I think I'm pretty smart.

Before we go, I wanted to ask you about Norm. Can you talk about what it was like working with him on his show?

Yeah, Joel and Paul Feig and I had sold *The Joel McHale* show to Netflix and we were in pre-production when some of the Netflix people called me and said, "Hey, so we picked up another show from Norm McDonald and we ran a bunch of producers names by him and he said, 'I always liked that K.P. Anderson guy.'" Norm and I had known each other when I got to LA and was a house emcee at the Improv; it was just before Norm got Saturday Night Live

and left. He liked me and thought I was funny, and I had a car and Norm needed a ride all the fucking time, so I became the guy who drove Norm around before Adam Eget was the guy who drove Norm around. Then he left and we'd see each other along the way, but we didn't really keep in touch very much. And then Netflix set up a meeting and we had dinner down in Santa Monica, and I walked in and he goes, "Oh, good. When I said I always liked that K.P. Anderson guy, you're the guy I was thinking of." Hi, Norm. The thing about doing that show with him was that he knew his voice and knew who he was and who he wanted to be. My company produced the show, but I just have to be honest and say that everything that happened on that show was because Norm wanted to do it that way, and it was great as a result of that. Norm was able to stare down Netflix. When we were talking about who our guests were going to be, Netflix sent over a list that had Nicki Minaj and Justin Timberlake, and Norm goes, "Okay, send them back this list: Louis Farrakhan, O.J. Simpson..." It's funny, there are things in that show where I feel like, "Oh yeah, that was my idea," but at no point in time did I ever feel like, "Oh, we are creative equals here." I do think he was very polite and would take every suggestion into account, but if it was getting filtered out, it got filtered out fast and you never heard about it or thought about it again. There was one time where I was really pushing some promo idea on him, and it was maybe my third lap around, and he goes, "You know, K.P., that's a really fun idea. It just doesn't feel like something I'm going to do." I was like, "Noted, moving on."

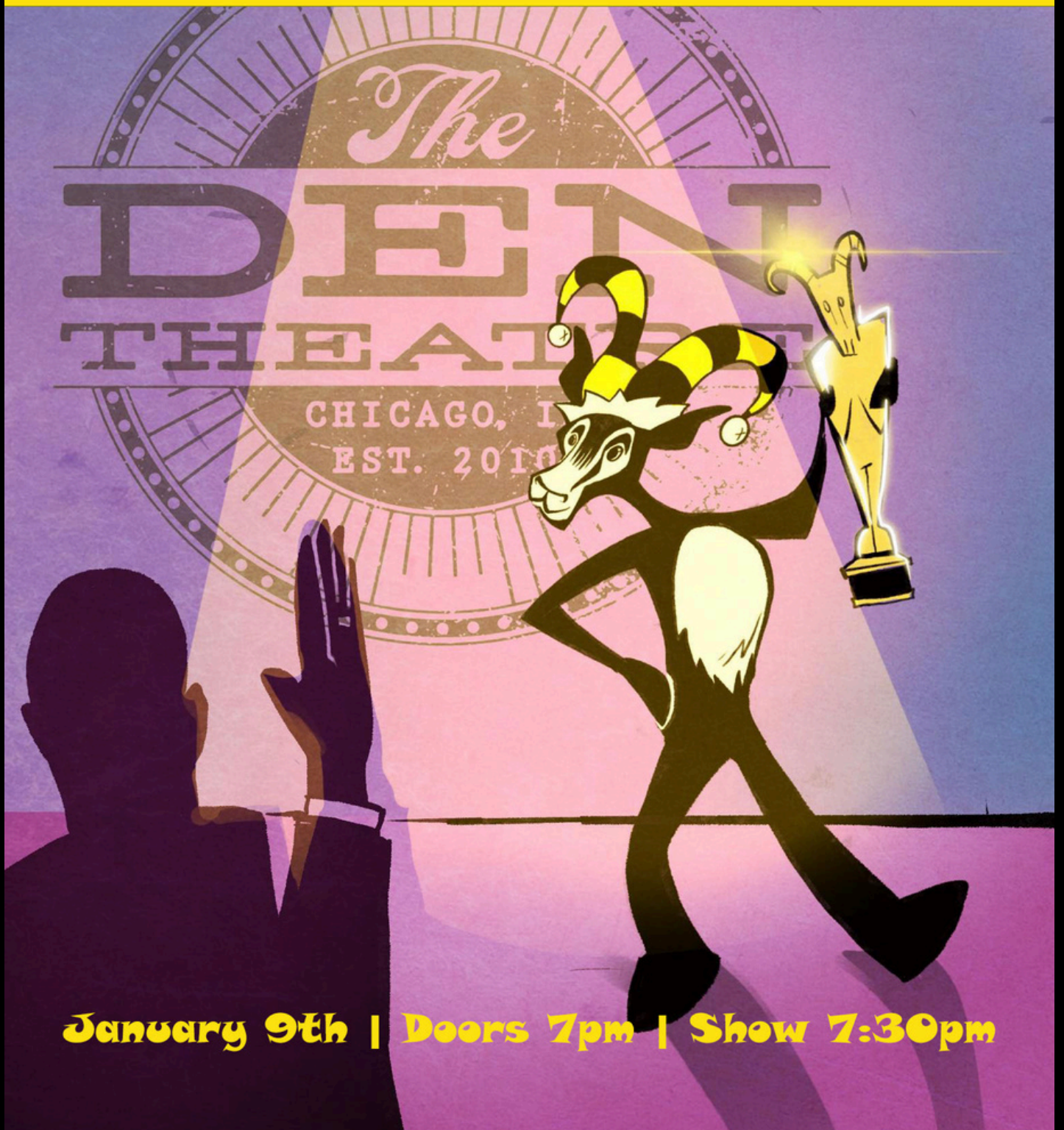
Maybe that's why he liked you. Because he was like, "This guy's gonna let me do my show my way."

Yeah, if I thought I was better at being Norm than Norm, I would be out of this business already. You have to see the distinctness in that talent and go, "How do I support it?" as opposed to "How do I try to mold it?" I do think there are people who make that mistake, who go, "I can make Norm a better version of Norm!" How? How the fuck are you gonna do that? We had a meeting at Netflix right before the show launched, where we walked in and they gave Norm a Netflix t-shirt. It's this meeting where they have all the Silicon Valley people, all the marketing people there to explain the magic of Netflix to the talent, like how the algorithm works and how we're going to connect with fans in Germany. And the first maybe 10 minutes of the meeting, Norm is sitting there, trying to jam the fucking Netflix t-shirt over his shirt, and he's not paying attention to a word the poor woman who's talking him through this is saying. And finally I go, "Norm! Would you like us to take a break in the meeting? You could go to the bathroom, take your shirt off, put the Netflix t-shirt on and come and sit back down." And he goes, "Well, I don't want to be a distraction!" Fucking Norm.



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2024 GAZELLIES



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