

# THE COMEDY GAZELLE

THE LATEST IN CHICAGO COMEDY



**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW:  
ALEX KUMIN**

# 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 supercharge herself with a firm slap of the puss.

## 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's easy to miss.

That's why I'm starting The Comedy Gazelle — to bring outsiders into the heart of Chicago comedy, and to showcase this city's unrivaled talent. To keep everyone up-to-date on the scene, and to do it in a fun way. And not just in a one-off article, but all the time.

Each issue will include an exclusive interview, as well as whatever else I can pull together.

Hope you enjoy.

— Jerry

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# INTERVIEW: ALEX KUMIN

*Alex Kumin (@alex.kumin) is a comedian, writer, voice actor, and the host of Cole's, one of the city's most prominent open mics. We talked about hosting, her process, her run-ins with cancer, voice acting and more.*

## **Cole's is such a notoriously long mic. How do you keep your energy up for 5+ hours?**

Definitely early on drinking helped for me. And then it didn't. By the end of the night I'd be so tired. Just, like, pacing yourself. The hosts switch off who starts the night each week and when you start, usually you wanna bring a lot of energy, and usually the audience has a lot of energy. I think also a big part of the energy you give the room is the energy they give back. It's very easy to host well and with enthusiasm when the people in the room are excited to be there and are paying attention and enjoying themselves. And conversely, you have nights when maybe it's packed, but people are there in more of an observing capacity, and those are the most draining nights. When I sense a little bit of low energy, I try to bring it up, and it's tough when you don't get that back. But it's definitely a give and take with the audience.

## **Do you feel like it's pushed you having to do that room when the energy is super low? I know you're doing some Zoom shows. Has that transferred at all?**

Yeah, we ended up doing the Cole's mic on Zoom from March till June. And hosting in person was hugely helpful in learning how to host on Zoom. It's definitely its own beast. But it absolutely pushed me to learn little tips and tricks on how to get the audience's energy up, but also to accept that sometimes you're just not gonna get them. Like, you've been to shows when an audience is on fire, and then there are also times when the audience is tired or it's a small audience with not a lot of energy. And to just accept that on those nights, that's okay. And to not get mad at the audience too. That's something I've noticed with hosting Cole's. On a night when it's slow or the audience isn't super responsive, you see a lot of comedians go up and get mad that they're not responding. "You guys just don't know what you're talking about. These jokes are funny."

## **How much of a bad audience do you think is actually on the audience, versus previous performers or the selection of your material?**

I tend to try not to blame the audience. Typically my thought is that for someone to pay for a ticket, or to



Photography by Sarah Elizabeth Larson (@selfoto)

make the effort to come out, with all the things to do in this city, to support live comedy, to pay ticket prices and pay for parking and all that — people want to have a good time. I try not to blame the audience. I think that can sometimes be an easy way out. Sometimes an audience is shitty, that just happens, but you don't want to get into the trap of every time you bomb being like, "Oh, well that was a bad audience." Sometimes a comedian falls flat, sometimes you're the comedian that falls flat. This career is a marathon. You're gonna have your ups and downs, and as long as those ups and downs happen on an upward slope, you're doing great. That's kinda the way I have to think about it.

## **I like that. It's like a stock over time.**

Yeah, exactly. You wanna see that stock continue to rise. And not let the market crash. But it helps also to take your ego out of it too. If you had a good set, pat yourself on the back. Great, you had a good set. But don't let it get to your head: "I'm incredible, I'm the best, look at me go." Because you're also gonna have a bad set right around the corner,

and you don't wanna get into that mindset of, "I shit the bed here. I did a bad job. I'm bad at this." Just try to keep an even keel. When you do well, awesome. When you do poorly, that's okay, get 'em next time.

**One thing Nate [Burrows] was talking to me about was the "roach" of the mic. When it gets toward the end and there's not as many people and the energy is down, as a host, what advice would you give to someone performing in one of those spots?**

Something I've actually found as I've hosted more is, depending on the night, that can be some of the most fun. I've seen people and new comics demolish at 1:15 in that room. And truly it's the highlight of the night, because you don't expect that to happen. So I would first say, don't discount the end of the mic as a lost cause. And again, getting on stage and getting in the habit of performing your best performance every time, that's a great time for it. The other thing is, if you're a newer comic, that part of the night is lower stakes. You're not gonna have as many people, it's not as nerve-wracking to perform to 15 people as opposed to 75 or 100 or 150. And also, just getting your reps in and getting your bombs in. You will continue to bomb as a comedian throughout your entire career, so the less power you give it the better. I've never, ever in my tenure of doing stand-up done a mic or done a show and gotten off stage and been like, "Man, I regret doing that." Every rep is just an opportunity to learn more. The other thing is that, especially at that time of night, sometimes you just need to fart it out of your mouth. Sometimes you just need the joke to come out so you can hear it and you can get the muscle memory of the joke out, and it's less about the audience and it's more about "I just need to practice saying these words in this order." So that's all stuff I'd tell any new, or seasoned, comedian who doesn't like going up at the end.

**Another thing I'm curious about: when you start the first seedling of a joke, have you already written it out, or do you just kinda talk it out?**

I'm definitely more of a writer first. I love to watch

people who are spitballers and can just go up and riff. I've always been envious of that, because that's not how my brain works. I like to be very intentional about word choice and word order, so I'm definitely a write-it-down, highlight it, bring it up at an open mic, try it a bunch of times and then let it go. But I'm definitely more of a writer first.

**Do you find yourself agonizing over tiny details?**

Yeah, a good joke is all about rhythm and pacing. I think about Steve Martin's book *Born Standing Up*. He talks about delivering a joke and a glass falls over right before he's delivering the punchline and the joke is ruined. Comedy is 100% about timing and making sure all the things are in place for you to deliver that punchline. So definitely a rogue word here or there, or finding the right word, or finding the right punctuation, or making sure your word economy is on point, are all considerations. But again, that's why we do open mics. And when I first started, it was a lot harder for me to just inherently know how that worked. Versus now, I'm a little bit more familiar with my voice. Still developing, I think it takes a long time to develop your voice, but I'm more familiar with my voice and my delivery. So when I'm writing, I just kind of say it out loud to myself to see, will this land? Will this hit? As opposed to just having no idea and needing to go to that mic to try it out.

**"I'VE NEVER, EVER IN MY TENURE OF DOING STAND-UP DONE A MIC OR DONE A SHOW AND GOTTEN OFF STAGE AND BEEN LIKE, 'MAN, I REGRET DOING THAT.' EVERY REP IS JUST AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN MORE."**

**Do you notice yourself writing a joke and then saying it completely different on stage?**

I have always had trouble memorizing things, so for me it's all about repetition. I'll write out exactly how I want the joke to go, and then I'll pick out – I call them trigger words – in each joke, and then in my set notebook I'll write down all the trigger words in order so that I can know what the order is as I'm learning to tell the joke aloud. But then also recording your sets, because sometimes stuff is going to fly in that you weren't planning on that you want to have for next time.

**Do you have any personal comedy goals?**

I would definitely like to be a little looser on stage. I feel like Cole's has done a great job of teaching me crowd work and hosting and I really love that. I feel comfortable in my writing. I'd definitely like to turn over more material, that's a big thing. And figuring out when I'm feeling creatively blocked, what to do to move through that. But learning how to be looser and just going on stage with a concept, rather than having something written out very specifically. I'd like to build that skill a little bit more.



**I feel like as a host you already have it.**

Thank you. Yeah, it's a weird thing. Cause between Cole's and Diamond Comedy Hour at The Laugh Factory, I host a lot, and I love hosting, and I think sometimes I put on a different hat when I'm hosting. Cause really, the host's job is to warm up the audience and keep the energy of the show up and make the other comedians look as good as possible. The host is the host. Versus being on stage as a performer, I sometimes find, "Wait you don't need to do crowd work at the beginning of your set. They're already warmed up. Say your thing."

**"When you're wearing that hosting hat, do you feel like that's your "true voice"?"**

When I'm like in the zone, and I have one of those nights where I'm connecting with the audience and I'm doing well, those sets are usually 75% of written material and then 25% me talking to the crowd, being silly on stage. 100% of the time I am present in the moment. That's the kind of performer I strive to be. Which is why I'm trying to bolster that skill of being a little bit looser and not worrying so much about word order all of the time. For me, I like a meticulous word order, because that just suits my voice a little bit better, but I think leaving room for a little bit of playfulness, for stuff to just come up organically, that's what I'm moving towards.

**What keeps you motivated with Zoom shows?****I know it can really be a grind.**

Full disclosure, I haven't done a Zoom show in a while. It's difficult for me to really stay engaged. I've been creatively switching gears a little, and writing a little bit less stand-up in the last six months and focusing a little bit more on other creative writing endeavors. When the pandemic first hit and we were doing the Cole's Zoom mic, it was really fun and none of us knew how long this was gonna be. So it was like, "Okay. We'll do this until we're back in the fall." There are some new things that I've picked up from learning how to perform on Zoom, but once we're out of this pandemic I don't think I wanna do it.

**What do you think you've picked up?**

One of the things I would always say at the Cole's Zoom, cause we would have the audience muted, was that all the comedians are gonna get really good at accepting silence. When the audience is muted and you have no feedback, it forces you out of that panic brain of like, "They're not laughing, what do I do?" into like, "Okay, let's keep it moving. Try the next one." It definitely helped me push through that mindset of needing the constant feedback.

**Do you feel like you still have that?**

Totally. I'm not gonna pretend that I'm this infallible being on stage. Absolutely. I'm still working through a lot of stuff. And as I'm navigating through this year, I'm learning stuff just about myself personally that is the reason that maybe I have some comedy insecurities. Stuff like that is helpful to uncover and be like, "Oh okay, so you get really squeamish when people don't laugh, or you get nervous, or you get down on yourself. What's behind that? Let's figure that out." This career and being in front of people and being vulnerable can kinda peel back layers of the onion. And that's one of the things I love about comedy. It promotes a lot of self growth too, of like, alright, figure this out. Cause you don't wanna keep feeling like that, so how do you move towards a higher version of yourself that doesn't give a shit when a joke doesn't land the way you want it to?

**Can you talk about any of the things you've been writing outside of stand-up?**

Yeah, I wrote a few pilots this past year, just dipping my toes into that. One of them was based on my

**Oh wow. I never knew that.**

Yeah, I had cancer when I was 21 and 26. Thyroid cancer. I started comedy when I was 26, so that was the second round that was happening. And they say write what you know, and that was what was on my mind when I started. And I didn't have the skills I have now to tackle really big subjects like cancer, but I did the best I could and I think that was good for where I was. But now just having a little bit more nuance and being able to temper the funny and the dark helped me to write that pilot. So it's kind of a dark comedy about that experience.

**That's so cool.**

It's cool to see because I took some of the jokes that I wrote and turned them into scenes in the pilot. Jokes that I know land with an audience, let's see if it would work in dialogue. And cathartic for me too, to get all of that down and to be able to not have it just in a stand-up format. Stand-up is like punch punch punch, the pilot allows for a little bit more breathing room and a little bit more emotion. I think it's a really cool medium. So yeah, just writing pilots and stuff, I've been doing more voiceover work.

**I wanted to ask you about that. I've heard the Lexus voice and your guided meditations. Are you trying to get into voice acting at all?**

Yeah, I've been doing it. I have a home

studio here that I set up at the beginning of the pandemic. I booked a bunch. I had one today. It's great and I love it. It's really fun to me, and I've been doing mostly commercial stuff, but starting to audition for character work and animation, stuff like that. And that's definitely a place I'm looking to venture a lot more into. And then the other thing too is like figuring out — I know I can write comedy, I know I can do voiceover. This year has been helpful in figuring out "Okay, why don't you write your own animated show?" Write a character, the pilot that I'm writing has a little cartoon in it. How do you figure out what your strengths are and then enhance those, and work with those and develop them. And understand that just like stand-up, or any creative form, it is a marathon and just put in the work and make those daily habits happen and you'll see growth eventually.

**Do you have a distant comedy-related goal? If you could do anything, what would you want to do?**

There's a bunch of different things. I'd love to be a voice in a Pixar movie. I'd love to write a Pixar movie and then voice it. Stand-up wise, to have an HBO special. I think there's a lot of different things, and as I'm writing more and branching out from stand-up more, I'm realizing Wow, there's so much. There's so much to do and it's really cool learning about the different avenues that you can take. And combining all the skills. I'm trying to be more well-rounded as a performer in general. I started in improv before stand-up and kind of getting back to that in performance and writing a little bit more creatively and not just for myself and my own voice. I'll do anything. I love it all.

**So how did your start in improv help you? Did it encourage you to try stand-up?**

So I started improv and did the Second City program. And I loved it. I had never done anything like that before. I loved the feeling of saying something and having an audience laugh. I was like, "Ooh, this is great." And then a friend of mine, Julia Shiplett, who is a wonderful comedian and writer in New York City, suggested I take a class. And that's where I learned the basics of stand-up and how to put together a five minute set. And I had a show. I remember that night just being enamored with it. Just being like "Oh, I'm gonna do this forever. This is the thing I'm gonna do now." And what I realized was it wasn't so much that I loved improv. It was that I loved when I said something that made an audience laugh. Not necessarily that I loved being on the team. So I very promptly quit all forms of improv. But I'm glad I did it and I don't mean to knock improv, it's great and it taught me a lot about being in the moment and being present. All the stuff that's important for when you're on stage.

**And you started stand-up after your second round of cancer? Did it help you get through that at all?**

Yeah, big time. My family has always been a laugh-the-pain kind of family. Half Jewish, half Arab. Definitely kind of a "let's joke about it" family. I remember when I first got cancer, I was sitting with my mom just sobbing and freaking out. What they do is they make an incision in your neck and they remove your thyroid gland. And she was like, "Well, you are going to be the best Pez dispenser on campus." And we were really able to laugh through that. One of the things I've always said about stand-up and love the most about it is that it can be so cathartic. It's not therapy but it can be therapeutic. I think when people are laughing at something, whether you're the performer or the audience, if you're laughing about something you have left a place of fear. To laugh at something, you have to be present and you have to be connected. So I think that's the way to get through painful stuff, to feel a connection with other people. So it absolutely has helped me process stuff and get through it. To have people come up to me after shows and say, "Oh, I had cancer too, it was really helpful to hear that and this is ridiculous." Cause when you're joking about big heavy stuff like that, the humor isn't "I have cancer." That's not the funny

part. The funny part is the minutiae, the detail, the stuff people don't talk about it. It's going to the hospital and being told you're gonna have radioactive piss. It's stuff like that.

**Yeah, my mom had breast cancer and that was right around when I was starting comedy. I don't know if I ever had the courage to talk about it, but I remember comedy really helped me personally.**

Totally. The other thing is, to talk about it you really have to be in a position where — one of the things Brené Brown talks about is that to share your story, your healing cannot be dependent upon the audience's reaction. You have to be comfortable and in a place where you feel ready to share a piece of yourself, rather than sharing something in hopes people will agree or enjoy it or laugh at it. You have to be in that place of readiness first.

**Last couple questions. Is there anything you wish was different about the Chicago comedy scene?**

I think in terms of North Side vs South Side comedy — I mainly do North Side rooms, but something I'd like to see different in myself is going to more places around the city and getting in front of different audiences and meeting different comedians. Cause sometimes I'll see comedians on lineups and I'll be like, "I've never met that person and they're Chicago-based. How have I been doing this this long and I don't know who that person is?" So I think more of an exploration of the city and the shows. Because there's so much, there's so many great places.

**Is there anything you like about the scene?**

This year has made me realize how much I love the stand-up scene here and I love how many opportunities we have as a city and as comedians to go up and do multiple mics and shows a night. And the bonds that I have formed with other comedians is amazing. I think that this city is churning out some of the best comedians in the country and you can see it. You see the Chicago presence in LA and New York, and it's a really cool thing to be a part of. And just the history of the Chicago scene is rich and long, and I'm just so happy to be a part of it.



## **BONUS: ALEX KUMIN'S TOP 10 CHICAGO COMICS**

- 1. MATTY RYAN**
- 2. CORREY BOYD-BELL**
- 3. MADDIE WEINER**
- 4. DIAMOND COMEDY HOUR CREW**  
**(CARLY KANE, ELISE FERNANDEZ, ALI DRAPOS)**
- 5. SOHRAB FOROUZESH**
- 6. SKYLER HIGLEY**
- 7. KELLYE HOWARD**
- 8. ERICA NICOLE CLARK**
- 9. CHRIS HIGGINS**
- 10. MARILEE**

# ARTWORK



Ahmad Daniels



Caroline Twyman

**CHRIS SANTIAGO IS A CHICAGO MULTIMEDIA VISUAL ARTIST, PERFORMER, DAD, AND FORMER CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS HIGH SCHOOL ART TEACHER. HIS LATEST (PRE-PANDEMIC) PROJECT WAS A PHOTO SERIES DOCUMENTING THE CHICAGO COMEDY SCENE.  @CHRISOBSCURA**



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# BOOK REVIEW: BOSSYPANTS

By Keay Crandall (@keaycrandall)

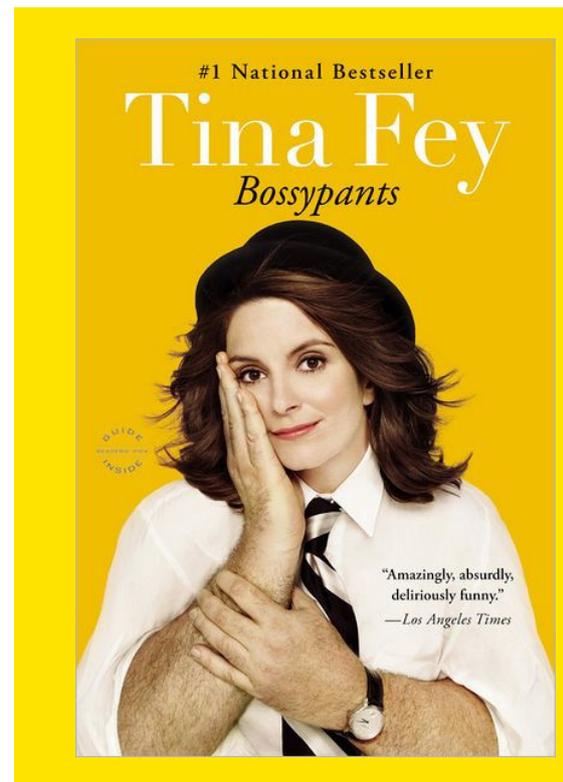
I liked reading what Fey had to say about herself and TV comedy. I want to read more from her. Maybe even something less than a decade old. The way Tina Fey writes about her career makes me believe that she somehow fell into comedy writing rather than chose it as a profession. It was refreshing to hear someone talk about Second City without it being the biggest thing to ever happen to that person.

I appreciate her frankness about overworking and exhaustion. I wonder if COVID has forced Fey to be lazy like the rest of us. Her story about discovering cups of pee around the office at SNL now resides in a special place in my heart.

As someone who's never watched 30 Rock, I am now tempted to watch the show. Bossypants is like a discreet viewers guide. Fey includes bits of her favorite dialogue from main characters and lets you know that Season 5 is where the show really finds its pace.

This book was amusing. Some parts are attempts at being 'real' about self discovery. like acknowledging her days of bossing around LGBTQ friends. Others acknowledge there are certain attributes that will not help you get hired by Lorne Michaels, like being too unstable in a writing session at 3AM.

4/5 Gazelles



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