

# 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.

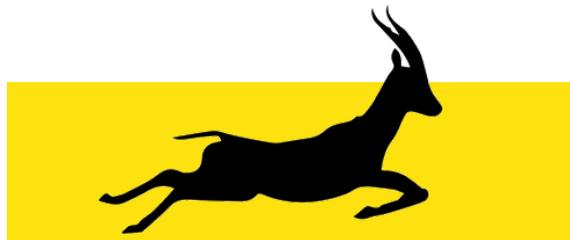
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# INTERVIEW: STEVEN HAAS

*Winner of the 2022 Gazellie for Funniest Social Media, Steven Haas (@stevenhaasinsta) does it all: standup, sketch, directing, filmmaking — you name it. We talked coming from a comedy family, growing your social media, getting started in sketch, and more.*

**Obviously, you grew up around comedy with your dad managing Zanies for so long. How did that influence you? Were you always interested and just knew that's what you wanted to do?**

No. I did some creative writing in high school. In college, I did some script writing. I wanted to do comedy writing, but I didn't know anything about standup. I never wanted to perform. I definitely wasn't hanging out at the club and meeting a bunch of cool people and stuff. I didn't know anything about the Chicago comedy scene. I did my first open mic and someone was like, "Are you related to the guy at Zanies?" I was like, "Oh, yeah, Zanies. Have you heard of Zanies? Do you know what that is?" I didn't know what that was. I only started doing standup because I was like, "I can use this as a visual writing sample." Then I sort of kept doing it. But I was really bad. I had been doing standup for like a year, and I took a public speaking class my senior year of college and I got a D. I was like, "Oh man, I'm not very good at this."

**That's hilarious. You really had no interest in standup?**

Yeah, I never really watched standup. My mom was a comedian so sometimes we'd go to her shows.

**I didn't know your mom did stand up.**

Yeah, she did clubs and stuff in the '80s and '90s. Then she became more for women's groups and churches; she did that market, a lot of family stuff.

**What do you think of her act?**

She's got some really good jokes. The gigs she was getting — it's like what we'd call hell gigs. That's what you get when you do corporate gigs. She definitely learned how to do those hell gigs, and nothing scared her. I remember going somewhere: it was a big hall, filled with people, no stage, no microphone, no lights, and they're like, "So are you ready to start now?" And she's like, "Yeah, let's do it."



**What a beast.**

Yeah, as I've done more and more awful gigs my respect has only grown.

**Was she helping you out when you were first starting?**

She'd give me some tips, but I didn't really want to hear them. People don't really want advice from their mom. But she gave me a couple helpful pieces of advice that I remember. I was never smiling on stage. She was like, "You should force yourself to smile at points to cue the audience that you're not going to kill yourself." Just public speaking kind of tips. It can be a lot when a comedian does their whole set and never once smiles. You might not notice it, but then you're like, "Why is the energy different in here?"

**What does she think of your standup?**

I think she might be my #1 fan. She subscribes to the Patreon, so shout out Sally Edwards.

**What about your dad? Does he think you're a hack?**

I think he likes my jokes too, but he does not subscribe to the Patreon.

**How old were you the first time you tried standup?**

I did my first open mic when I was like 20. I really didn't start doing it until I was 23 in Los Angeles. That's when I started doing it like every day.

**When did you feel like you started hitting your stride, finding your voice and feeling more comfortable on stage?**

I don't know, it's weird. At five years I was like, "I'm pretty good at this." Then at six years I was like, "Maybe I'm not very good at this." Probably at like eight. I feel comfortable now. I can do decent for a headlining set, just having enough material where it's like, "If they don't like this, I'll do this hackier stuff I wrote five years ago." It's just helpful to have a lot of stuff you can pull from.

**Are you planning to record anything of your own?**

I don't know, maybe. I kind of like the Jay Leno thing where he just never had a special. I might do that.

**You're directing other people's specials and you don't wanna film your own?**

I feel like if people like the stuff I put on social media, like sketches — come see it live. I don't really watch Netflix specials that much. Sometimes I'll watch to see the directorial choices they've made, but I don't really sit down and watch the full special, so I don't know if I should be releasing one.

**So the idea is to get people to come to your live shows.**

And then buy a t-shirt.

**I saw you feature at Joe Fernandez' special taping. I thought it was interesting how quickly you were able to establish your point of view. People just seem to get who you are right away. Was that always the case?**

When I was first starting, I think doing those two-minute open mics in LA really forces you to get going right away. Open mics are good for that. I used to just talk about jobs I'd have. I think I had a 20-25 minute feature set that was all about different jobs I've had. Recently, I've started talking about more personal stuff, and more point of view specific stuff. It's tough. The way I feel about it is that you have to be like, "I feel this way," and just sort of hope people agree with you. You can always tell when people are dipping their toes in and they're like, "Do you feel this way? Because then maybe I do. Does anyone else?" You can tell when people are insecure about establishing that comedic point of view. I think you just need to say it and hope they agree.

**You've got this huge following on social media. Do you feel like you've been able to grow that audience because your point of view resonates with people?**

Maybe. Hopefully people like the stuff I'm putting out there. But it is tough to gauge with any of those algorithm-based social media platforms. Because you post something and it gets a million views, then you post something else, and it gets a thousand. And you sort of go, "What's the point of even having followers if there's this huge discrepancy in views?" It's hard to tell how much getting followers really contributes to having a following.

**Do you have any advice for comics looking to grow their social media presence? I know that's a challenge for a lot of us.**

It's tough. The only things I've noticed are camera and audio quality wise, where it's like, "That's a great joke; it's a shame you shot it on such a terrible iPhone and the audio is all muffled." If a clip has crisp audio and good camera quality, that's 50% of it, in my opinion. Other than that, just look at clips that have been posted by comedy clubs. That can be helpful; you can look through and see which clips do well if a comedy club posts a diverse cast of clips. From what I've noticed, things that hit well on social media either hit with a certain subculture or there's something that can be distilled into a specific niche, which I guess is because of the hashtags.

**How do you feel about posting standup clips? I know there are some people that're like, "The joke isn't done yet!" And then for others it's just a numbers game.**

I think it depends on what people want to do with their social media. Someone like Sam Morril will post all of his clips. And then there's someone like Marcello Hernandez, who specifically doesn't post any standup clips because he's

like, "They should come see me live." And he just got on SNL, so clearly what he's doing works. But he also posts front-facing kind of videos. It feels like you need to figure out what exactly you're trying to do with your social media and post clips that work with that. If you're not posting standup clips and you're also posting nothing else; that's not gonna work. You gotta post something. Standup's a good default.

**Do you have your own personal strategy? Or are you just like, "I created this; I'm gonna share it."**

I used to obsess over the time of day to post, but now I don't. I just post whenever it's done. People are on their phones all the time now, so I don't know if that matters. I haven't posted standup clips recently, and I'm fine with that. I got a lot of followers when Instagram first introduced reels, but it seems to have steadied off. I'll see clips where someone gets 5 million views, and it translates to 200 followers. That's not a good long-term number.

**That's what I don't get. Getting people to take that next step and actually follow you. They're just like, "That's great, bye." But how do you actually grow that audience?**

That's a good question. I don't know. It probably helps to be hot. I think hot people do well on social media. Also, good camera quality and audio quality.

**So be hot, and make sure people can clearly see that you're hot.**

Yeah, dude. That's just my own personal observation. It's too bad, because when reels first came out it was easy. I think I got 40,000 followers just from two videos getting a bunch of views. People were just following everyone. But it really has steadied off quite a bit, unfortunately.

**I'm curious how you manage your time. You're doing so much stuff: standup, sketch, filming, directing, editing. How do you find the time to do all that?**

Thankfully I've been making money doing freelance stuff. Some of those projects are paid, so it helps go towards rent. But I'll usually plan one day in advance. So the night before, I'm like, "What am I gonna do tomorrow?" Then I just do it. Sometimes it's writing a sketch, sometimes it's editing. It goes pretty quick when you just sit down at your computer and you do it. Drink a bunch of coffee.

**When you're writing a sketch, do you just crank it out in one sitting?**

I have a list of ideas I haven't made yet. I sit down and



free write, or free associate, and if something catches my attention, I make a note of it. I do a lot of structuring. I structure everything out before I write any dialogue. There's usually three steps involved: brainstorming, then structuring it beat by beat, and then typing out the dialogue. But once I get to the dialogue, I kind of know what it's going to be like, so it's pretty easy to sit at the software and type it out.

**When you're writing dialogue are you writing with the actors in mind?**

Yeah, usually. I think I usually have people in mind, especially when they have a more unique voice or persona or something. Someone like Dan Cass is super unique. But sometimes there's people who have every-man kind of qualities. You'd strike me as an every-man kind of person, like a Tom Hanks.

**I did take an acting class in college, and everyone was comparing me to Tom Hanks. But you're doing all this different stuff. What are you most interested in? What's the dream for you?**

I like making my own stuff. I like doing every step of it. I guess the dream would be to be able to make money doing every step of the process. Writing something, shooting it, doing some editing. I like to do all the different **5**

steps. I don't like to do just one of those things. Hopefully someday I can get enough cash to do that.

**So it's not necessarily standup or film, you just want to make money creating all your own content?**

I think film and standup together is the way to go. Just doing film - you don't get any feedback except someone in the comments like, "Lol". Which is nice, but with standup you get that immediate feedback from the audience. But film's cool because it's done. I don't like how standup's never done. There's something nice about have a project and being like, "It's done; this is it." I think it's important to have stuff that can be done. There's a safety to being able to be like, "It's always a work in progress!"

**How do you decide if an idea would work better as a standup bit versus a sketch?**

I've done both, where I've done something that became a sketch as a standup bit. I haven't quite cracked that: if it works better one way or the other. Sometimes if I'm writing standup and the joke is like, "And then he said, and then they said, and then I said," I'm like, "Oh, this is clearly just a sketch." Whenever I notice I'm writing a lot of, "They said to me and I said to them," I'll usually try to make it a sketch.

**I know a lot of comics will always be like, "I have this great sketch idea! Let's film, let's write!" But then it never gets done. Do you have any advice for people in terms of actually getting something made, produced, and out? How do you get started in digital sketch?**

Make something short: like one page, two people talking. Then shoot that. Start very simple. When I first started shooting, I'd say like 50% of the stuff I shot, maybe more, just never got released because it wasn't very good. Shoot with your friends, then if it doesn't turn out well, you don't have to release it. Even now, I shoot stuff that sometimes doesn't get released. You kind of have to do the guess and check method. It's a lot easier once you start doing it. It can be very intimidating just to do a close up, then a medium shot, but then when you do that enough, it's not a big deal. Just do it. Then good camera, lighting and stuff. Or not even. Now it's all phones, so you don't even need good cameras.

**When you film something that doesn't work, what's the most common reason for that? It's funny on paper, then just doesn't translate?**

Yeah, it's like standup, where you think of a joke and just have to say it on stage and hope they laugh. Then sometimes they don't laugh and you're like, "Well that's too bad." It's the same with sketch, except you have to waste everyone's time.

**You just intuitively know, "Oh, this sucks?"**

You send it out to people and they're like, "Okay, cool." It's not like, "Hell yeah! I can't wait for this to be released!" Then you're like, "Okay."

**You've got test viewers?**

Yeah, I've been doing that for YouTube, where I'll release it there a day or two early because I don't have very many followers. That's like the focus group. I'll see what they think, then decide to release it on platforms where I have more followers.

**And when you're doing these sketches, how much direction are you giving people?**

I guess for every line I have an idea of how it should sound. I don't do the director syllable thing where I'm like, "Say it exactly like this!" I'm just like, "We could try it one more time, a little bit sadder." You just shoot it a couple of times. Not too much direction, I hope.

**So, you're developing all these different skills. What're you trying to improve on right now?**

Right now, I'm working on editing a movie. We shot a movie and I have to finish editing that. That's one of the more challenging things I've done. It's the longest project I've ever done.

**"IT'S IMPORTANT TO HAVE STUFF THAT CAN BE DONE. THERE'S A SAFETY TO BEING ABLE TO BE LIKE, 'IT'S ALWAYS A WORK IN PROGRESS!'"**

**Feature length?**

Yeah, we shot that in August, so I've got to finish it soon. It's tricky. The nice part about editing a sketch is you can watch it all the way through and keep watching it to find what you need to fix. Editing this movie is very difficult because I can't sit and watch it six times to figure out what isn't working

**You wrote and directed everything?**

Yeah, we shot it a lot like the sketches. Very DIY. It was a script I wrote five years ago, then rewrote it to have no budget. Last summer one of my friends was like we should shoot it, so we just shot it in ten days, which is very fast.

**Oh wow, so it's been in the works for years then.**

It's been changing. But yeah, I wrote the first draft to submit to festivals. It was one of those things. The scope then was bigger, so I had to narrow it down since I have no money.

**How many feature scripts did you write before that? I know some people write and write.**

I've written a few full ones. In LA, I did script consulting, so I read screenplays and I gave notes, or judged them for contests. I've read thousands of screenplays.

**What separated bad from good, and good from great?**

Just writing quality. The way they use dialogue and action description. Some people will type out ten lines of action description and your eyes start bleeding. Just writing tight dialogue. There's a lot of things that make for a good screenplay. But the more I read screenplays, the less interest I have. They don't really work well for comedy. You can't convey any aspect of comedy in a screenplay. It kind of works if you've seen the movie, cause then you can replay the movie as you've seen it. But reading an amateur screenplay? It seems insane: "Who would possibly think this is funny?"

**Do you have any advice for writing good dialogue?**

From my days of reading screenplays, the biggest thing to avoid was always on the nose dialogue, where characters state exactly what they're feeling or thinking. A lot of times you have to be like, "What is this person actually feeling, and what are they saying to cover up how they're feeling?" It's tricky, because a lot of times characters not only don't say what they're feeling, but they say the exact opposite of what they're feeling. Just like people. It's hard to write good dialogue, especially if you're writing a screenplay for someone else to produce.

**Is it the same with sketch?**

Sort of. I feel like sketch is quicker, so it can be less realistic. But writing realistic dialogue I think is very difficult.

**Well, congrats on filming a feature. That's very cool.**

Thank you. We'll see how it turns out. If there's a premiere, I'll invite you and you can review it in the Gazelle. One star!



# FIRST LESSON IN ROMANCE: AN ODE TO KATE WINSLET'S BOOBS

by Mary Kelly (@marykellycomedy)

Every February I find myself thinking about romance, as the glittery red hearts start appearing in shop windows and all the single people I know get whiny. My first introduction to the idea of sex and relationships wasn't traditional. I wasn't getting any examples of love at home. Let's just say my parents were divorced even when they were together. By the time they actually got divorced, my dad was living on another continent and my mom had kids with her new man. Instead of family, the movies I saw became my north star to help me understand what love and romance was. None more so than the epic, action-packed, romantic thriller, *Titanic*.

(If you're somehow not familiar, this is the 3 hour movie James Cameron made before he jumped the shark with 3 hour stories of 9-foot fall blueish green people who ride flying dragons and live on a luminescent planet with feelings. In the late 90's he was hyper fixating on telling another story - right here on planet earth.)

I heard about *Titanic* from Steve Kast on the bus ride home from grade school one day, and I begged my Dad to take me. He said yes but we had to wait until Friday. We got tickets. They were \$4.59 each.

I couldn't contain my excitement, and every day before we saw the movie I would page through my copy of *T is for Titanic* - a real children's book my parents let me have, despite the judging reaction of some relatives. I guess you could say I was already passionate at a young age about my love for Mother Nature's capacity to completely destroy humanity's big plans.

As you can imagine, I already knew a lot about the sinking. James Cameron isn't the only one good at hyper fixating! When I walked into that movie theater, I was prepared for a play-by-play historical account of the dreadful tragedy I couldn't stop reading about. Steve Kast said that James Cameron had spent two hundred mil on this, and Steve Kast said two hundred mil was a lot. You see, Steve Kast was an expert on money because his dad worked at the old bank with the columns next to Southridge mall. For that much mil, I wanted every single detail to be in this movie. I wanted an entire side story line about the Astors. I thought we would get a deep dive into how the Titanic was also a Royal Mail Ship. I wanted more information on the 'Cockie Leekie,' a dish they served onboard. I was looking for 2 triple-expansion 8-cylinder engines and 1 low pressure turbine going 22 knots towards disaster. And honestly, James Cameron did deliver on that last part.

What I wasn't prepared for, was the sex scenes. Those are burned into my brain for life, for better or worse. James Cameron's version of Cockie Leekie.

Most notably, I was shocked by the boobs. I couldn't believe nobody on the bus told me there would be boobs. I wasn't ready for how boobs made me feel. Wow - those

looked good. Like, really good. Her skin looked so soft. Kate Winslet must have never been to Wisconsin, because nobody I had ever met in Wisconsin had skin that looked that soft. We looked like lizards that time of year in Wisconsin. Kate Winslet looked like an American Girl doll.

My dad was also shocked by the boobs, but he didn't think as fast as I did. By the third millisecond of boobs on screen, I had scurried out of my seat. I had to avoid this awkward moment entirely, I said I wanted soda and I rushed off.

But when it came to it, I couldn't leave the theater. I mean, I couldn't miss this. My dad would never make this mistake again, I just knew it. Everytime we went to the theater he was going to start asking all the employees if there were boobs in the movie. I didn't make it further than an alcove next to the stadium seats, and there I hid in the dark, watching transfixed, heart pounding, as I fell in love with Kate Winslet.

(And that has never changed. Have you seen Ammonite? Holy shit.)

Suddenly I wanted someone to draw me. I also wanted to draw someone. I thought about my art class, and it took on a whole new meaning. In a cut to present day scene, Rose says "my heart was pounding the whole time. It was the most erotic moment of my life." And I had to agree with her.

As I stood in the dark, a bit of my shock wore off, I found myself confused. Didn't she just meet this guy a few days ago? She is already showing boobs and everything? My teacher at St. Alphonsus, Sister Bernadette, said we had to watch out for wayward men. They would try to see boobs and other parts before marriage. Was Jack a wayward man? I don't know, I didn't think wayward men would be so charismatic and know how to draw that well. Unless... that's all part of the game.

Jack and Rose were now running around evading a bad guy, and I was trying to think of something to say to my dad. At that moment, our two stars hopped into a car below deck to presumably have sex. She starts kissing his fingers. Well I can't go back to my seat now. I would have to wait for this scene to end. How long did intercourse last?

I had learned about intercourse and a million ways to avoid it in my Abstinence Only Education Class with Sister Bernadette. At first I thought maybe Rose would offer Jack a piece of sugar free gum to curb his craving. That was something Sister Bernadette suggested if we met a wayward man. From what I was observing here, it didn't look like Jack or Rose took the class. Did they even make sugar free gum in 1912?

Suddenly the steamy handprint on the car window scene pulled me back to reality. Holy cow, that was the most raw thing I had ever witnessed. And even crazier because I knew that deck they were fuckin on was about to be submerged in water in less than 22 minutes.

I think Sister Bernadette must be confused, sex doesn't seem so bad. I started planning the next time I could see this movie. Maybe my mom hadn't heard there were boobs yet. My parents told each other absolutely nothing after all, a loophole I would use to my advantage for years to come.

When I got older, steamy handprints on the window became a mental barometer I used to define a good sexual encounter. Only recently did I connect the dots and acknowledge the power Kate Winslet's boobs and steamy hands had over me for years.

Was the sex I was having with my first college boyfriend any good? Yes, of course it was. Maybe a little clunky, maybe pretty quick, but everybody was giving it their best shot. Was it steamy handprints on the windows good? No, absolutely not. His room didn't even have a window. In the heat of the moment I tried a steamy handprint on his stucco wall once, but it was more like a sweaty handprint and it didn't really have the same effect.

Back in the theater, it was at least twenty minutes before I returned to my seat with no soda and a new Kate Winslet obsession.

The ship had already started sinking, which really made me mad, because they spent all that time on boobs and intercourse right at the part I wanted more of, which was how they hit the iceberg. James Cameron didn't cover anything about how the operator of the 'California' turned off his radio five minutes before they started sinking, or how the steam-powered steering mechanism took up to 30 seconds to turn the ship's tiller. In fact, James Cameron insinuates Jack and Rose cause the sinking, because the lookout boys are too distracted by their post-coital running about. I'm sorry, no. There was nothing about Jack or Rose in *T is for Titanic*.

My dad looked relieved I was back, then instantly worried again. "That took forever! Are you okay? Why didn't you tell me there were boobs??" he whispered frantically.

"What boobs?" I said, trying to play dumb, as if I wouldn't be thinking about those boobs every single day for the next decade at least. He didn't press it, but he looked annoyed. I tried to change the subject, "So, my friend Steve Kast said there would be tits in this movie. What are tits?"



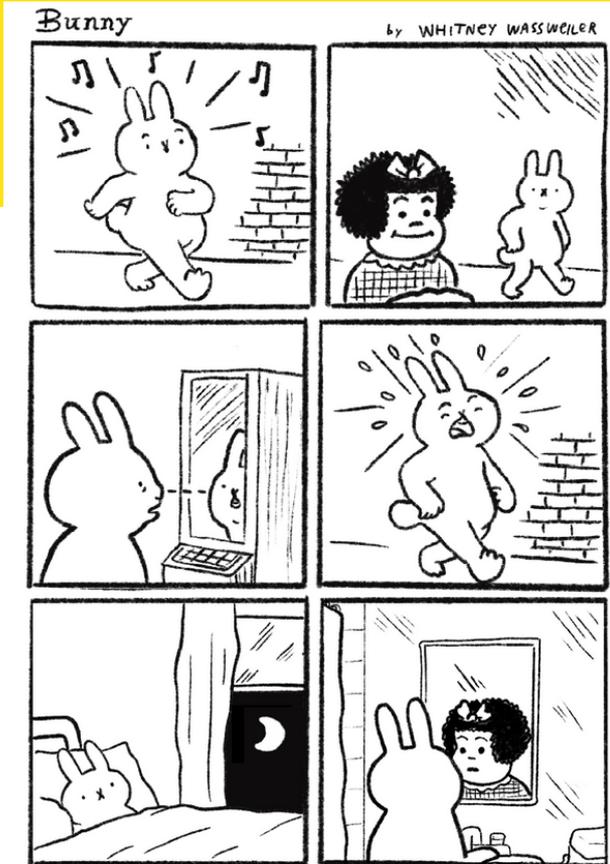
# ARTWORK: WHITNEY WASSON



**WHITNEY WASSON (THEY/THEM) IS A MULTIDISCIPLINARY ARTIST AND PERFORMER, ORIGINALLY FROM FORT SMITH, ARKANSAS WHO LIVES IN CHICAGO. THEY WRITE AND DRAW SOBER RABBIT. LEARN MORE AT SOBERRABBIT.COM**

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to solve a **MURDER MYSTERY!**  
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**NOT DEAD. JUST OVERWHELMED.**



It's so... so...  
beeyuteefull.

**THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO  
MADE THIS POSSIBLE.**

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