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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: KRISTEN TOOMEY

*Kristen Toomey (@kristentoomey) is crushing it. Her debut special, *Shriller*, is now streaming on Apple TV, and this November she'll make history as the first woman to solo host the Chicago/Midwest Emmys. Beyond being one of the funniest comics I know, she's also one of the best people to talk to when life hits and you need some perspective. What follows isn't so much an interview as a conversation about being resilient through hard times, how to build a strong mental foundation, and how to balance it all.*

KT: How's your dad doing?

TCG: He's good. He just got a lung transplant. For context, what happened is he got put on the transplant list and I'm his primary caregiver, so it was like at any point he can get a call and then I have to drop everything and move to Madison. So, for months, I was like, "Well, I don't wanna book anything because I might have to cancel." So, I took some time off comedy and now I'm reevaluating my whole existence.

How many months has it been?

Probably about four or five. I think I did one mic and was like, "God, I hate this."

I think you did the right thing. When you've got heavy stuff like that on your mind, on stage is probably not the best place to be. In my low points, I was performing and I probably shouldn't have been. And then I had a total burnout collapse for over a year.

I think when we get into comedy, we forget that this is the rest of our life. This isn't college; this isn't something we have to grind out for four years. This is our whole life. And so, there's going to be periods where we all have to take a knee and take a minute. And that only makes us better when we come back. We appreciate things; we've had life experiences so we're not talking about fucking airports and fucking comedy club venues, food, and hotels. You have actual things that people can relate to that are deep and meaningful.

If you're weighing heavy, like your dad's waiting for this crazy big surgery, the last thing you wanna do is go to a fucking open mic and watch people talk about 9/11. And yeah, you were there for your dad. That's the type of shit that matters at the end of the day, for your life. When



push comes to shove, you wanna make the right choice.

Having said that, people go through ruts. I'm kind of on the verge of a funk myself. Because the world is fucking crazy right now and it seems insane to get up there and talk about dating.

Yeah, you wanna talk about it, but it's also like, "Do I really wanna put them through more of that shit?"

That's so true. I'm so consumed by the geopolitics and politics all day that I'm doing standup to get away from it. That's my time of the day where I don't have to think about anything else but making these people laugh and I can take a break from everything terrible.

I think the same way you were telling me it's a good thing that I'm not bringing my dad's surgery on stage, it's probably a good thing to avoid [politics] if you're not in the mood to talk about it.

Well, you need time to heal from that trauma before you can make light of it. And I think sometimes we're always in a rush to put something out that we're not okay to be laughing at, and we're not ready to laugh at it, let alone have a group of people laughing at it. So, there is something to being protective about the shit that really matters to you too. I think when we're starting out, we

fucking talk about everyone we love. We talk about everything that's ever mattered and we shit on it, just to have something to say. And I think as you get a little wiser in this, you realize, "Hmm, maybe that's not the best move."

Yeah, I've definitely had some of those instances where it's like, "Oh man, I kind of regret doing that bit." I was just so desperate at the time for material.

There's also something to being kinder to yourself, being kinder to others, and being more precious with your life too. I think people just wanna say the most edgy, harsh, shocking thing, and I don't know if that helps us sometimes, but whatever. I think you're very funny. And the last time I did a show with you was the furniture store, the Don't Tell. And you crushed, dude. I was so impressed by how much you've grown since the first time I saw you. And I know you starting [The Gazelle] is a clear indication of how passionate you are about comedy. How many years in are you? Eight?

I don't even know. I generally go off when I moved here, so like six years or so.

Well, I think after that initial excitement — that first five-year rocket launch of passion — it's like, alright, you're married to this thing now. And you can fight it like I have, you can wrestle with it with one foot out the door, similar to my actual marriage. Or you can just accept that there's going to be ups and downs, and the initial honeymoon period is over for you at six years. You're not someone that they just open the velvet rope for. There are people like that, you know? But if you're not one of those people, [from] six years to fucking 15 years, you gotta come up with your own motivation, your own game, your own carrot at the end of the stick. You have to create that. Whatever it is, it's always around the corner, and you've gotta fucking believe that to keep you going. Because it is a long game for most of us.

Yeah, for years I thought, "I just have to develop a good set and get funny and then something will happen." And then I did that and nothing really happened. I also started realizing the reality of what it actually means to be a full-time, working standup. I started thinking, "Is that what I actually wanna do? Do I really wanna be a full-time comedian, or do I just love doing standup and wanna do standup?"

Yeah man, that is a new level of awareness. Because, like I said, the rose-colored glasses are off and you're seeing, like, "Oh, shit. Okay, so Lorne Michaels isn't gonna walk into my house and scoop me up."

The reality is there's a lot of traveling, there's a lot of hotels, there's a lot of planes, trains, and automobiles. Some people I know who are fantastic comics are just like, "I don't wanna live like that," so they stopped. But there's people that just work steady, and that's what you want. You want enough to pay your bills and you also wanna balance that with a fucking life and your friends and your nephews and your kids or whatever.

I think the aspect of self-promotion and audience building takes out so much of the joy for me. And then it's like, "Well, then you don't want a career in comedy." And I'm like, "Maybe I don't. Maybe I just want to perform cause I love it and that's good enough."

How old are you?

I'm gonna be 30 in November.

The good thing is you can always just do standup, right? You can always just go out and fucking do it. With no pressure to become a star or become a celebrity, or get a bunch of followers, or sell a bunch of tickets. You don't have to fucking worry about merch. You don't have to do any of that. You don't have to shake a single fucking hand. You can literally do your 10 minute set and tell people to go fuck themselves. Cause I've done it for years. Do whatever makes you happy. If you're sacrificing your own joy to do this shit, nobody fucking cares. If I stop tomorrow, like three people would notice and you'd be one of them. No one gives a shit. You can't be doing it for any other reason than you fucking want to and it's fulfilling something in you. Do whatever makes you happy and you'll be so much funnier and you'll feel better. I would rather work a job and only do things that I wanna do than do something that I don't feel like doing.

So, based on that, would you or would you not perform in Saudi Arabia?

Perfect. I really teed you up for that, man.

I don't think I would do that. Because if they were even asking me, I would already have so much money that I wouldn't need to do it. If they came, and for some reason they wanted this loud mouth over there right now – and no one knows who the fuck I am – I would probably think it was a trap. If you see me doing something like that, something's wrong. If I'm doing something like that, they got me, man. They got me. If I'm ever in a fucking KFC commercial or they got me over in the Middle East doing something, I'm fucked up. You better call Liam Neeson. They got me. If I'm over there, they got me fucked up.

At this point, do you feel like you do stand up for fun or because it's a potential career? When I started I was like, "Oh, I wanna be a comedian." And then I kinda lost sight of, "Oh, I should have fun first and focus on making people laugh and having a good time."

I think the short answer is comedy is fun for me. I haven't enjoyed it every day, but for the most part, it's fun and I enjoy it. I actually filmed something recently and I was like, "It would be nice to be in a show or a movie or something like that." And the thought of, "Oh, well, that would interfere with standup," didn't bother me, which is new. It'll be 17 years next month that I've been doing this. I feel like I would like to branch out where I could still do stand up because it makes me feel physically better when I do a set, even on the days where I don't feel like getting in my car and driving 40 minutes to do it. Once I do, as soon as I'm off stage, I feel better physically, mentally, spiritually. I just feel better.

Do you think you'd still do it if you knew there was no prospect of you blowing up and "making it?"

Yeah, I do. I thought about that many times. I think for a long time I believed that that wasn't actually going to happen for me. I went from absolutely expecting that to happen to absolutely expecting that to never happen. And now I'm somewhere in the middle of that, where I'm okay and I'll be fine either way.

When you were going through those ups and downs, did you feel more free on stage or feel like you evolved at all afterwards?

Yeah, I think that's happened multiple times. The first time that that happened where I was kind of being told like, "Nobody gives a fuck," I think that I was really fueled by spite. Of like, "Fuck you, I'm gonna show you." I kind of built my confidence up with that. And then when that all crashed down, I started just telling myself,

"Nobody thinks you're good." That was important because I had to break myself down completely so I could value my own opinion over the opinion of other people. I went through this imposter syndrome: "Everybody's full of shit. They're all making fun of you," to the point where I couldn't trust anybody's opinion.

And how many years in were you at this point?

This was like 2019, so I was about 10 years in. Maybe it started in 2017 because I started really questioning doing comedy in 2017. So probably nine years in. At that stage, I couldn't really trust the audience's response cause I thought maybe they were laughing at me, not with me and not at what I wanted. Anyway, all that psychosis was to get me to the point where I could say, "Well I think it's funny and I think I'm funny. And I enjoy doing this, so I'm gonna continue to do it. And if people like it, that's awesome. And if they don't like it, okay, whatever. I don't care."

I think it's so interesting because I think there's two versions of that. There's the version where it's like, "I'm gonna say whatever I want on stage. Fuck you," and it's just offensive and bad. And then there's the other version where it's like, "Oh, I'm free." And I feel like I'm nearing that freedom, where I'm like, "I don't give a shit anymore."

You are. And you know why I could tell you are? Cause you're fucking miserable right now. And that is right before you get there. The freedom is exactly proportionate to the misery right before it.

I remember when I interviewed Dale, he was like, "My own family doesn't like me. What the fuck do I give a shit about what these strangers think of me?" At a certain point it's like, "You know what? I don't even really care what these people think of me anymore."

Well, you can see that if you're really paying attention to some comedians. I've witnessed it quite a few times and there's

actually somebody that is brilliantly doing that right now. Luca Ferro moved to New York and according to him, he got his ass kicked so bad in New York. And he's brilliantly not giving a fuck, letting it all out. He's hitting a stride with it and you can see it in the clips. I saw it in person. He came home and he fucking murdered at Laugh Factory. He's got a fire in him right now because he was so miserable right before that, and he would probably say part of him still is. That's just fuel for a comedian; misery is a fuel for us. But it's hard to do sometimes when our life is fucked up. When we're dealing with something, whether it's drugs, alcohol, divorce, family members – whatever it is – we're not always in the head space to turn the garbage into gold. And that's okay; you'll get the next round. There's plenty of fucking misery around to turn into joy.

In our last interview, I asked what you'd like to put out into the universe and you said, "An increase in faith." Do you feel like that's paid off for you?

I do. I feel like that's something that I kind of struggle with a bit: wanting to assert my will on things and just having the wisdom to not do that and let God take care of it. That is a bit of a struggle. But it seems when I'm able to do that, it works out way better than I would've assumed. Most of the time, when I look back on the best things that have ever happened to me, at the time, they seemed like terrible or scary things. And those are the things that I'm most proud of today and that are the best things that ever happened to me. I was talking to another comedian and they're kind of obsessed with getting famous; they'll tell you that themselves. But I said, "You know, sometimes a blessing can be a curse if you're not ready for it." People think they want something, but they haven't done any inner work to prepare themselves for it. It's like, "How well are you managing what you have right now?" Are you managing the paycheck you get every week? If you can't manage what you have, well, then why would God or the universe give you more of that? If you're not happy now, why would you be thrust into a spotlight where it's going to make everything more intense and scary and worse? That's protection. That's not no one listening to you; that's you being protected.

Right, you have to build a solid foundation and build up to that.

I think we should be focused more on that. If your foundation is good, then you're doing sets that you love to do, that you think are funny, that you think are interesting. For the most part, you're working on it. You're enjoying performing, and you're making enough money to survive, then that's all good. Then anything you get on top of that is just extra. I don't have any set goals that are out

of my control for that very reason, because I can't put my happiness in someone else's hands like that.

From the outside looking in, it looks like things are going great for you. You're hosting the Midwest Emmys, have a bunch of followers now, you released a special. What do you think was the big turning point or thing that set that in motion for you?

Well, I think a couple things. I think I proved to myself that I'm resilient. I think I made the necessary adjustments to get better and made some pretty good choices that I wasn't making before for a while now. Like five years of healing from what I was going through. And I think I've really learned to love and respect myself in a way that I had never had before. And I think I realized how powerful my love can be, and if I have my own back, then I'm fine. Nothing can get me down for too long. I'm in my corner now, whereas during that time, I was not in my corner. I think that was the turning point. It was like, "I've got me, and whether I win, lose or draw, I've got me."

I love your answer and I love that it's all internal. It's not, "Oh, this one thing happened." It's, "Oh, no, you have to get yourself right and build that foundation." I remember you said something to me about how you need to treat yourself like you would treat your friend or your kid. Like if they screwed up, you have to treat yourself with the same love that you'd show them.

Yeah, you have to unconditionally love yourself in this world. And we are all called to do that. And that is really not that hard to do. For some reason, we all get kind of stuck on it, but really it's what

**"I'VE GOT ME, AND WHETHER I WIN, LOSE OR DRAW, I'VE GOT ME."
– KRISTEN TOOMEY**

we should be doing. We get this bad tape running in our head and we have to learn how to tell that to fuck off and start telling ourselves a new tape, which is that I am worthy of love, that I am loved, that I'm safe, and all that self talk. You have to consciously reprogram yourself and re-parent yourself. No shade to our parents, but they did the best they could, and they weren't raised well. It's just re-parenting yourself like you would to your children and giving yourself that unconditional love that we all need in this world.

What does your self-talk sound like when you get off stage after a bad set? I think it's easy to sit here and be positive, but in the moment it can be hard to actually be kind to yourself.

What I actually do, cause this just happened in North Carolina, I had like 103 fever and it was the second show in a row with this fever, and I was just sweating profusely. I was a mess, dude. I bombed for like 20 minutes. I got one pop and therest was like scattered pops. And I got off stage and I felt like, "Okay, that wasn't good." But then what I do is I replay it, like, "What could I have done differently from the get go?" I just kind of go over [my set] like watching a playback of a sports game.

I wanted to ask you this because someone asked me and I was like, "I actually don't have a very good answer." One comic I know who's three-ish years in did a show that he's always wanted to do. It went well, but then he hit this depression. And I told him that's totally normal. I've felt that so many times where it's like, "Oh, I finally achieved this goal," then you just go from this high back down to reality.

You know what? And that never, ever stops. That is something that I learned that caused a huge depression, because I thought that once I got this level of something or this level of something, that I would feel some kind of way and feel complete. And then I saw my friends getting these huge things – things that were even above what I was hoping to get – and they were fucking miserable. And that's exactly it. They got the thing; they somehow got the carrot off the stick and then they couldn't fucking eat it cause they had no teeth. You know what I mean? That's why you have to be enjoying what you're doing today.

And what would your advice be to this person? What's helped you?

What's helped me is I make a conscious effort to be in a state of gratitude as often as I can. That's really huge and it kind of builds from there. But I would say try to be in the present moment and look for the positives in things.

Get your mind right. Read books, pray, sing in the shower – whatever it is – get your spirit up and love yourself. That has a ripple effect. Do something for other people. Then the comedy is just a bonus. You know what I mean? Your life is your life. Your life is not comedy. Comedy is in your life.

I just wanted to say thank you so much. I haven't done an interview in months. Didn't really want to, wasn't in the mood, haven't been performing. And I was like, "You know what? I want to talk to Toomey. She seems like the right person to talk to." And this was super helpful for me. I'm excited to get this out too because I normally don't talk too much about the shit that I'm dealing with in interviews. And I felt like talking to you, I could be open about that. So, I appreciate you doing it.

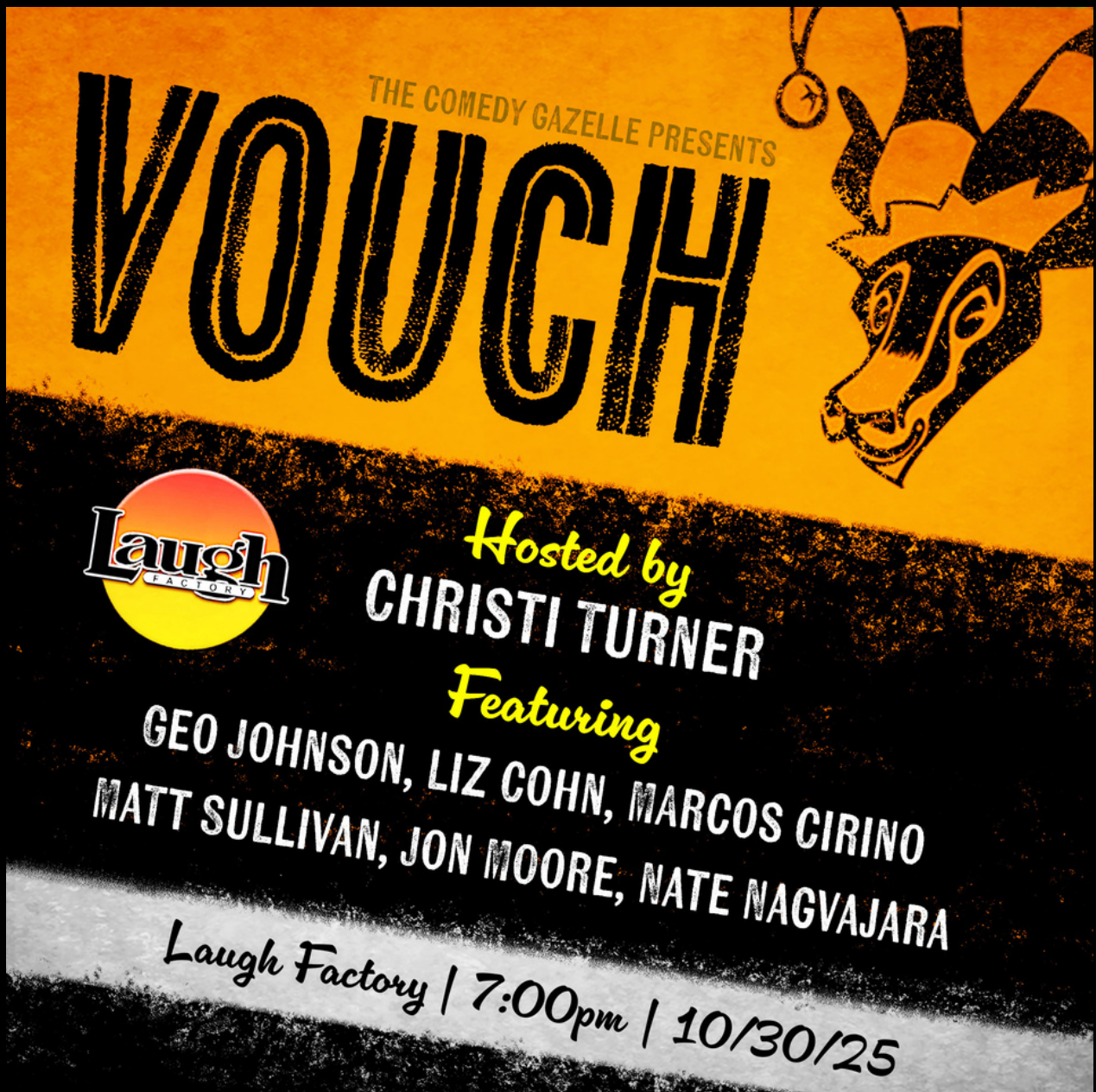
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I love you too.



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Comedians Recognizing Comedians

ELAINE GOLDEN

"Elaine is absolutely killing the game. Her jokes are unbelievably sharp and she is the sweetest human to exist. She recently went on a run of career growth opportunities and I couldn't be prouder - keep a lookout for Elaine because she is simply the best."

MILO MACK

"Milo has been running open mics and showcases in Chicago for about a year and a half now. He used to run the Miki's Park open mic in River North and now runs the showcase/open mic in Burton place in Old Town. He is a phenomenal writer and comic. Even more than that, he has a magical ability to bring people together through his shows and support of other comics; Milo lifts up the Chicago scene."

NICKY B

"Nicky is a constant killer, great producer and host! He brightens every room with his energy!"

"Dude's made huge strides recently not only with his performances/writing but also with his productions."

SO FAR SO GOOD

"If you haven't seen so far so goods stuff yet, youre missing out. Some of the best musical comedy in the city if not the country. They're always willing to experiment, put more alternative acts up, and help others out who deserve a chance to play bigger shows. Truly two of the nicest, hardest working, funniest individuals around."

ABE KHALAF

"Solid, memorable, different yet relatable to all. This guy has it going on right now you can't go wrong with Abe."

DEVIN GLASS

"Devin runs a great mic at Trader Todd's on Wednesdays and brings a great host energy that keeps the room alive from start to finish. His Blind Wolf Speakeasy show next door is also an intimate show with great comedians."

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?
WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

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