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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: ZAHID DEWJI

Zahid Dewji (@zahiddewji) is a touring standup and former writer on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, as well as head writer of OFTV's *The Roast of Bert Kreischer* & *The Roast of Whitney Cummings*. We cover: what makes a good roast joke, the reality of writing for *Late Night*, how to put together a packet, creating on your own, and more.

There's a pretty big roast scene here in Chicago, so I wanted to start there. As the head writer on two major roasts, what do you think makes for a great roast joke?

I always used to tell my friends that it doesn't have to make sense, but it has to feel good in your gut. It shouldn't be too long-winded, unless you're doing a thing where the length of it is a part of the joke. But with roast jokes, if you're like a beat extra, the joke goes away. You can feel it. It's a rhythm thing. Also, the joke doesn't have to be logically sound. I remember Don Rickles had one where he was like, "Listen, go home and put some skates on your face." That shouldn't make any sense, but it's like the funniest thing.

Yeah, it's almost like confidence and rhythm is more important.

In standup, you have more time and you can set up stuff. I think with roasting, if you spend even a beat extra setting up something, the whole thing can be thrown off. So, I think a great roast joke should be immediate. One of the best ones I ever heard in my life was at the Bert [Kreischer] Roast. I think Zac Amico either wrote it or helped write it, but Jim Norton said to Donnell Rawlings, "How do you look like the owl and the Tootsie Pop?" And dude, it got one of the hardest laughs. It was like a fucking thunderous thing; it was so cool.

I know you used to open for Whitney. Is that where that writing gig came from? I'm curious how someone gets staffed on a big roast like that.

So, when I was opening for her on the road, she would roast different cities on Patreon. If she was going to Detroit, it'd be like "The Roast of Detroit" on Patreon. I never wrote Whitney's material or anything, but she would ask me to write some roast jokes for whatever cities. I had won Roast Battle in Houston and battled in LA, so I was involved in a lot of roast stuff. But I would write these roast jokes for cities, and then I remember



PHOTO BY: @CANTBEJESSE

she was like, "I'll Venmo you." And I was like, "You don't have to. You're taking me on the road; this is a part of my job." Then when she had these roasts, she was like "Do you wanna help me write these?" She didn't have to, but I think that was her way of paying me back a little bit. There was a lot of trust and communication there.

I wanted to ask you about your time on *The Tonight Show*. A lot of standups think they can just pivot into writing if standup isn't working out. Can you talk about the reality and difficulty of writing humor professionally?

After I left *The Tonight Show*, a couple months later they hired Kurt Braunohler. Kurt has a Comedy Central full hour. Kurt is so much bigger than I was or am. You are going up against Kurt Braunohler. Do you know what I'm saying? That's like if you were playing high school basketball and then Ja Morant joined the league.

To me it seems like if you're playing high school basketball and it's not working out, so you go, "Okay, I'll just be behind the desk at TNT." It's like, "No, that's even harder."

Exactly. Getting a writing job is almost harder, and everyone's gunning for them. And you gotta remember, the

people that are gunning for them are really doing a lot as well. So, I would say to just keep making stuff. I think a good example is that Brooklyn Coffee Shop show. [Pooja Tripathi] made it herself. That's the better route. Go and make your show. Go and write it. Go find a cheap way to do it. Why would you hedge your bets on an industry that is so selective when another industry is allowing you to put out whatever you want?

That's a good point. I saw a YouTube video where this exec is talking about breaking into Hollywood, and he talks about the difference between a creator and a writer. Either way you're going to struggle, so are you gonna struggle creating your own vision, or are you gonna struggle trying to get hired to execute someone else's vision? No matter what, you're struggling, so you might as well pick which one you want.

Yeah, the struggle is gonna happen regardless. The great part is you can start treating right now as if you have the job. Just start writing. Write it. Put it out. Literally write sketches every day. The Brooklyn Coffee Shop thing happened because someone wrote this idea and put it out. If you really wanna make something, go prove the concept. Go make it, find the funding. Do everything you can to get what you want. And that means you have to try harder. I think that's a much more attainable goal in comedy: just act like you already are doing it. If you wanna write movies, start writing them. Don't wait for someone to be like, "Now we would like you to write movies." If you want to go do a thing, just go and do that thing.

I feel like a lot of people dream of writing for The Tonight Show, but underestimate how challenging the day-to-day is. How demanding is it really?

On a scale of 1-10, it's a 20. It's a lot. The asks are constant. The hours are long. The level at which they expect you to write, even when stuff doesn't get picked up, is very high. Sometimes I would truly have 15 minute deadlines. It's 2:23 and they're like, "Jimmy's coming in at 2:40. I need this on my desk at 2:38." It can be that intensive. It's just constant jokes that you're putting out.

You're under all this pressure and these time constraints. Obviously you want to put out your best work, but I imagine sometimes you can't always do that. How often do you have to settle for "good enough?"

You have to pick your creative energy. You'll try to put

in as much as you can for certain gang writes — which is when a doc goes out to everybody and you put in your jokes — but you also have all this other stuff to do. It's just like homework: you had small assignments, you had big assignments. You can't focus on the small thing too much if you've got this huge project due.

Can you walk me through how you ended up on The Tonight Show?

The old head writer, Mason Steinberg, reached out and was like, "I think they're looking for a music guy." My degree is in music ed — I was teaching guitar and piano for quite a while — so I submitted a regular packet, but I had songs attached to it as well. Then we went back on a pass like three times. I would write, he'd edit, I'd write, he'd edit. We finally got to a point where he was like, "This looks good. Let's officially submit this." I was like, "Alright," and I didn't hear anything for like two months. I kind of just figured I didn't get it.

Any advice for someone trying to put together their own packet?

Years ago, I asked my cousin, who's a really good jazz guitarist, "What's the best way to pick up playing?" And he said, "It's going to sound stupid, but start listening to it more." Watch the show. Watch the show for like a month, every day, with a critical eye. Imagine yourself already writing on the show and then watch it from that perspective and take notes. You're going to start noticing details and see trends and patterns that pop up. You'll start to get a feel for the voice of any show by really listening and watching critically. Then, when you go to write the packet, you don't want to give them what they already have. You want to showcase what you're bringing to the table. You want your voice to come through and fit with the show, but not get lost behind what the show is. You also don't want to submit stuff that would never make it on. It's like the sweet spot in between, where it's you, but the show together.

If one of your friends started writing for *The Tonight Show*, what advice would you give them or to someone in their first big writing role?

Something our old head writer used to tell us was, "Keep your head down and keep writing." Don't let any frustrations get to you, keep asking for feedback, and defend yourself when you think it's worth it. A really good example of defending something was when I was assigned to produce Olympictionary for Kelly Clarkson, Mike Tirico and Peyton Manning. It was an Olympic take theme on Pictionary that we do. All the clues were supposed to be Olympic themes, so one of them that I put on the list was "shuttlecock," which is the thing you hit in badminton. Our producer was like, "I don't think enough people will know what a shuttlecock is." And I go, "Well, that's why I put it on there. Visually, it's a good word." Then he came back an hour later and he goes, "You know what? I thought about it. Let's keep this one in." So we kept it in and Kelly pulled it on the first try. And then she actually drew a whole penis and the room exploded. We blurred it out; it was so funny. Then after she drew it, Peyton goes, "I know what that is! That's a shuttle. That's a cock." It gets this huge laugh, and then Jimmy gets up and throws his jacket. He's like, "This is a family friendly show!" Then when I left, a couple of people on the show were like, "Dude, that was one of my favorite moments on the show; amazing job with Pictionary." That all came from just defending one word.

That's awesome.

Obviously a bunch of things had to go right, but it starts with being like, "Hey man, I think this is something that could be worth defending." If you do that humbly and nicely, I think people want to hear your opinions. It's when you come in guns blazing, cocky, egotistical, that people shut down before they hear what you're proposing.

It sounds like there's a lot of soft skills you need as a writer. It's more than just being funny.

Exactly. People have to like you and want to work with you. They have to feel like they can give you feedback without getting clap back, and they want to know you're a team player that can handle their shit. That's what that job is: do what's being asked of you, do it at a high level, do it every single day, and be okay with rejection. It increased my professionalism, but it also pushed me a little bit to realize, "Oh, I can just create at that level by myself."

How does that feel now? Having more freedom to create on your own and do the projects you wanna do?

With that type of job comes security, salary, health benefits, all that stuff. And then when you're doing it alone, there is no security. So, it's cool, but your back's against the wall. You're just writing and making stuff non-stop. Like last night, I finished three spots then went to the West Village at 1:00 AM and shot until 2:30, then got home at 4:00. But I have to do that cause that's when my video guy's available. You just keep on doing it because you literally have to. It's like you're a new business, you know?

Right. It's like the difference between working corporate and being an entrepreneur.

Absolutely. There's pros and cons to both of them, but the pro of being on your own terms is that it's on your own terms. So, if you fail, you fail on your own terms. You've just gotta continue writing and creating stuff and trying to fill every gap of your schedule with things to work on. I think that those are the people that actually are successful. Because that work ethic will eventually just crack through whatever boulder they're trying to knock down, you know?



PHOTO BY: CASSIUS PETIT

What are you focused on right now, personally? Are you trying to grow your audience? Are you just trying to write better material?

Right now, I feel like I'm in the moment. I'm turning 39 in June, and I feel like this window over the next two years is probably the most important window because it becomes harder to continue growing as an adult human being and acting like a child professionally. So, I'm kind of doing everything right now. I'm writing sketches, working on a web series, and trying to produce a pilot I wrote last year. I'm gonna record my first special — inshallah — by the end of the year. I'm also shooting a man-on-the-street series at 1:00 AM every weekend, posting a reel or clip every day to keep socials growing, doing as many spots as I can when I'm in the city, and also trying to get on the road. It doesn't leave a lot of room for anything else, but I'm really trying to throw everything at the kitchen sink. I don't think people realize that's kind of what you have to do; you have to keep carving away. You want your numbers up, you want to convert that into ticket sales, you want to be able to go on the road, and you want to release projects that sustain your socials as well as the live act. There's no singular thing that does it. You're just spinning more plates and actively working to keep them all up.

Earlier you mentioned defending something you believe in. Can you talk about that in terms of standup? I feel like you need to have confidence in your own sense of humor, but then there are people whose acts suffer because they never listen to the audience. How do you find that balance, personally?

I think it's just time. You can't skip steps. You can't be a 10 year comic two years in, and you can't be a 20 year comic 10 years in. I think Norm is a good example of being yourself. We always tell Norm jokes, even if they didn't work in the room, because we all know that it's still the funniest thing. People that go, "The audience is always right," are out of their minds, in my opinion. Especially today when I think the literacy rate of critical thinking is like the worst it's ever been. I feel like the better you get, the more aware you are of how good the joke is and how great it can be. I don't think that has a lot to do with the audience. If food tastes good and some people don't like it, it's like, "You don't have to like this, but it's still good." I don't think a chef is out there being like, "Fuck, they hated the oxtail!" It's like, "You don't like oxtail? That's fine."

I love that metaphor. If you go to a restaurant, you don't have to love everything on the menu, but it's still chef quality food.

Yeah, we're the chefs, and after 12 years of comedy, I'm

still gonna get things wrong, but overall, I think my batting average is gonna be much higher than it was two years in. So, with the sheer time you've put in, your sensibilities are gonna get stronger.

I've been thinking a lot about this recently: when you do standup, do you actually feel like you're helping the audience by making them laugh and giving them a night of entertainment? Or do you think that's bullshit? I feel like it's easy to say you care about the audience, but do you truly believe that?

Yeah, especially recently. I would say that even two years ago, it would go more selfish, especially when frustration came into it. I would go more, "Fuck you guys!" I still do some of that, but now it's more with a twinkle in the eye, where people know I'm fucking around. But, yeah, I do. Because the night goes better for everybody. I have a better set, they have a better time. If I'm enjoying myself, they're enjoying themselves. There might be times when you're like, "This audience sucked," but then you remember, "Oh, they paid for tickets, they bought drinks, they paid for a babysitter to come out here." They've carved out time to come watch you. And why would anyone watch you? Who the fuck do you think you are that you deserve to be watched? So, if you think that, you better fucking bring it. You know what I mean? If you think that you deserve to be watched and listened to, you better have something to watch and listen to.

"YOU CAN'T SKIP STEPS. YOU CAN'T BE A 10 YEAR COMIC TWO YEARS IN, AND YOU CAN'T BE A 20 YEAR COMIC 10 YEARS IN."

Before we go, do you have any advice for any up-and-coming comics who are discouraged or frustrated with where they're at?

Find a group of people that you fuck with. Lean on the support systems that you have and trust that you already have. Like, don't complain to everyone. Complain to your friend that loves you and gets it and is with you in that. Find support systems, whether that's friends in comedy, friends outside of comedy, family, a therapist, whatever. Direct it properly is what I'm saying. If you're walking around all day miserable and frustrated and going to mics, and you're clearly frustrated enough to where you don't wanna do it, don't do it. I don't have a pie in the sky answer. If you're choosing this, just work on your shit. I mean, truly, hit it like you don't have tomorrow. Because there's somebody behind you that's hungrier than you. If you wanna do it, you'll figure it out. And if you're frustrated, welcome to the club. Here's a seat.

KEEP UP WITH ZAHID @ZAHIDDEWJI



PHOTOGRAPHER: CASSIUS PETIT



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VOUCHI



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Comedians Recognizing Comedians

REBECCA JOEY SCHWAB

In a short amount of time, she's gone from open mic regular to staple performer and standout producer. From co-running the Windy City Comedy Festival to curating shows that uplift her community, she consistently creates space for others to shine while sharpening her own voice on stage.

SAM ROSSI

He is unbelievably good at what he does. It seems like he's perfected his stage presence to a point that's quite admirable. I've seen him in shows and in mics multiple times and always kills. An amazing joke writer, great at delivery, consistent. He's truly special and people can see it! Doesn't hurt that he is also a genuinely nice guy.

NATALIA SOVERO

Natalia is about to hit a year and she is really finding a way to blend her naturally funny off stage personality into her sets. Very fun to watch.

SAMIR ABDUL

An incredible comic who has slayed every single lineup I've shared with him. I've seen him turn a dead quiet audience into a warm joyful space. I also think he is incredible to watch at open mics – he is consistently trying out new things, even if they don't always work.

NATALIE WHALEN

Natalie has consistently paced upward as a comedian, she is reliable and palatable to all varieties of audiences, and her development as a comic over the years has been really fun to watch. She also runs great shows. Keep an eye out for her!

VINNY PAOLINI

Vinny has an ability of taking familiar topics and crafting clever or silly punchlines that catch you off guard. His bits are well-polished and delivered with charm and spontaneity. He's a consistently solid and dependable comic.

TOM GOSS

“Recently relocated to Chicago and his Leaving the Tribe podcast is fantastic! I can't get enough and look forward to hearing more long-time Chicago scene members on it.

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?
WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

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