Professor's class takes serious look at comedy
Humor is a 'constant reflection of culture'

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By John Pope
Staff writer

So here's the setup: An academically impeccable Tulane University faculty member was talking about her senior seminar on stand-up comedy.

Have you ever done stand-up comedy? Rebecca Mark was asked.

"What do you think teaching is?" she shot back.

Ba-dum BUM.

But seriously . . .

And that's the point: Her course is serious, Mark said, even though the once-a-week class sessions are punctuated with laughter at the occasionally profane tapes of comedians such as Lenny Bruce, Robin Williams and Demetri Martin. Through an examination of comedy's evolution, Mark wants to do nothing less than to get students to understand the roles comedy plays in society.

"It's interesting the way it changes over time and how culture changes and how they change together," said Jason Greenwald, a senior from New York's Long Island. "Comedy is a constant reflection of culture; that makes it really relevant to study."

Mark, 51, realized how much tastes in comedy and comedians can change when she and her students discussed their favorite comics.

When Mark announced that her favorite is Lily Tomlin, the students, who are in their 20s, stared at her blankly because they had no idea who Mark was talking about. And when Mark chortled at a Lenny Bruce tape from the early 1960s, the students smiled politely at what had been groundbreaking humor more than four decades ago.

Similarly, the students' top comics, including Sarah Silverman and Dave Chappelle, were unfamiliar to Mark, but she made a list, and she's tracking down their routines online.

Allie Shipp, a senior from St. Louis, had a simple answer for taking the course: the destruction that Hurricane Katrina caused.

Even though Shipp said she wouldn't dream of cracking jokes about suffering, she said she thinks the class will help her cope by confronting it.

"Once you name the beast, you can laugh at it," she said.

Mark agrees: "The moment you laugh at a foe, that person has lost power."

'Comedification' of country
While Mark, an associate professor of English, enjoys exploring comedy with her students, she is a serious scholar of Southern literature and culture, with books such as "The Dragon's Blood: Feminist Intertextuality in Eudora Welty's Fiction" gracing her résumé. She also is the interim director of the H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College Institute.

Mark got the idea for the comedy course when she heard increasing numbers of her colleagues tell her that when they watched television, they were paying more attention to programs such as "The Daily Show" and "The Colbert Report" than to newscasts. As Mark watched, she found that these were the shows where newsmakers, including presidential candidates, were showing up.

So she decided to launch an academic examination of what she calls "the comedification of America."

"When I have a question I don't know the answer to, I teach a course," Mark said. "Maybe we can get a few laughs along the way."

But even with all the reading she requires, as well as a three-minute routine each student will have to devise and perform, Mark doesn't pretend that they'll get close to answering this riddle: What makes people laugh?

"We don't know," she said. "We'll never know. That's the mystery of comedy, and it should stay that way."

Mark's background includes theatrical work, but she hasn't tried stand-up comedy, saying she's more of a storyteller than a comic.

But, she said, "I've never not been interested in comedy."

Mark comes from a family tradition of Yiddish humor, which, she said, has provided a way for Jews to cope with centuries of misfortune by finding amusement in -- and, sometimes, in spite of -- their surroundings.

"That's the way people got through," she said. "It's what keeps us alive. . . . We use comedy to talk about very serious things."

Mark saw this type of humor on display last year at Mardi Gras, the first post-Katrina celebration of New Orleans' signature event. Everywhere she turned, people were defiant in their determination to enjoy Carnival, wearing T-shirts with rude -- but funny -- expressions about governmental sloth. Some merrymakers rigged up elaborate costumes displaying such phenomena as cyclones and the vanishing coastline.

Seeing such in-your-face reactions to the tragedy that the storm had wrought, "I thought, this is for me," Mark said.

But comedy and tragedy always have been inseparable, she said, pointing out that this blending can be found in Greek drama.

"In the Renaissance, they were separated," Mark said. "That's the most tragic thing you can do because comedy is rebirth."

A stand-up guy

If stand-up comedy has a pre-eminent scholar, it probably is John Limon, the author of "Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America," which is required reading for the Tulane course.

Limon, 56, is a Williams College professor of English who said he grew up envying people who could make others laugh.

"I was fascinated that something was happening in their minds that wasn't in anybody else's," he said. "That made them really smart."

To try to understand the mechanics of humor, Limon spent much of his adolescence watching hours of situation comedies to figure out how they worked. By the time he ascended into academe, books about such trappings of popular culture as comic books and jukeboxes were being published, so he set out to write about stand-up comedy from an intellectual standpoint.

"I wanted to say things clearly, but it had to be intellectually respectful," Limon said.

"I wanted to show that I got the joke without being as funny as the comedians themselves," he said. "The best compliment I get is . . . that it's intellectual without being solemn."

Stand-up comedy, he said, involves a constant exchange of power between the performer and the audience. At first, the comedian has all the power because he knows the punch line, and the audience doesn't, and the listener has to be sure to get the punch line and not to laugh at the wrong spot.

But the power swiftly shifts back to the audience, Limon said, "because if I don't laugh, he's out there hanging."

As they think about what they'll do in their three-minute sketches, that's what worries the students most.

No faking it

"It's intimidating," said Lisa Gazley, a senior from Winnetka, Ill. "If people stop laughing, I wonder how they're going to compose themselves. You're on the stage baring your entire personality, and your time isn't up."

That's what makes stand-up comedy different from any other kind of performance-based profession, Limon said.

If something goes wrong in an opera, "a good singer knows how to fake it," he said. "An audience may applaud, but he's not putting his career on the line every second. If a comedian has a bad night, he's a failure, and if he doesn't make people laugh, it gets worse. Every comedian describes it as dying."

Because of the pressure, Limon said he never has been tempted to step in front of a microphone and try to be funny.

"I'm too scared," he said. "It's the scariest thing in the world."

Instead, Limon chose to get up in front of students in a classroom and teach.

"It's what you're doing if you can't make it as a stand-up," he said.

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