

Stand Up To Be Counted

By

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Comedy as a career is a very serious business but it can bring great satisfaction, writes Peter Vincent.

The idea that your main duty at work could be to make people laugh is so unlike most people's idea of a "real" job that few dare to pursue a career in comedy. Instead, humorists typically arrive in a funny job after road-testing an eclectic range of occupations.

Stand-up comedian Julia Morris began her working life as a receptionist in a real estate firm.

Herald cartoonist Cathy Wilcox sorted mail for Australia Post, sold menswear for David Jones, taught graphic design and was a production assistant for a printer in the days before computer designing. "It was stultifying and made me sleepy," she says.

Clown doctor Peter Spitzer, aka Dr Fruit-Loop, was a GP in the Sydney CBD but moved into the performing arts after realising he was using comedy to win over nervous children and their parents.

"Instead of giving them lollies I would juggle and use balloons and magic tricks. It eventually developed into my clown doctoring, which I have been doing for the past

11 years."

Wendy Harmer, a stand-up comedian, comic scriptwriter, broadcaster and author, was a journalist in Geelong and Melbourne for 12 years (at one point Mark Trevorrow - better known as Bob Downe - was a colleague).

Harmer says her workmates never took her move into comedy seriously. "Whenever I came back to the office to visit, they were sure I had come back for my old job."

Tanya Bulmer started as a dramatic actress in shows such as Home And Away and A Country Practice before switching to comedy. "I got a few gigs on Good News Week and they kept asking me back - I couldn't understand why."

One of the myths about being paid to make people laugh is that it's not "real work". But Bulmer has always found comedy "more intellectually demanding".

As a dramatic actor she was presenting someone else's work but, as a comedian, she has much more at stake.

"You put your own persona on the line when you are delivering comedy. Just because you like your jokes doesn't mean anyone else will.

"So you have to really craft it and think hard about the audience. I'm something of an introvert, so I have to come up with the right persona to deliver the gag so it works."

Organisational psychologist Christopher Shen says working as a humorist is as demanding as most occupations.

"Anyone who thinks it's not real work should see Jerry Seinfeld freezing up in the

documentary Comedian.

"The process he goes through to craft his jokes is painstaking. Being a successful humorist is akin to being any other kind of professional."

So what personal qualities are needed to become a successful humorist or comedian? Morris says you need to be meticulous and also have a good memory - in her case, so she can remember the improvised gems that had tumbled out while on stage. "And you need a thick skin. Either that or bad hearing."

But on the serious side, Morris believes it's essential to balance observing the world as it is without becoming too bitter. "It's really the last man standing with the least amount of bitterness. We all get bitter but to work in comedy you can't let it build up."

Morris believes it's obvious if someone is cut out for comedy. "They have an X-factor; it's definitely a situation where you don't choose comedy - it chooses you."

Shen says it is unfortunate most parents and career counsellors don't support comic ambitions. "The model of careers advice propagated in school is that the only noble careers are professions and trades. Comedy is considered to be frivolous."

Shen says aspiring humorists usually forge their own path - but there are a few options to pursue. Would-be stand-up comedians and comic actors can do courses at drama schools such as the National Institute of Dramatic Art or through theatre sports. But nothing beats practical experience, Shen says, as comedy is a craft that has to be practised and honed.

But the permission to be funny makes the graft worth it. Wilcox says: "I work hard and can get stressed over deadlines but I'm not having to hide or compromise who I

am. I'd hate to have a job where I had to be other than myself."

Harmer believes coming from a family that uses comedy every day is a great grounding for pursuing a career in it. But she keeps coming back to comedy because getting laughs gives her so much satisfaction.

"Sorry if I sound like some kind of Pollyanna but every night it's like being bathed in alpha waves; it's a brilliant, life-affirming energy," she says.

You have to laugh

Christopher Shen believes there is no single reason people are drawn to make others laugh for a living.

"It might be about projection," he says. "They might have been raised in an environment where they were delighted and enriched by others who made them laugh and they want to recreate that for others.

"It might be more of a tragic-comic thing where the role is so different from their usual temperament that it becomes very appealing to bring pleasure to others because they can't in their normal life. Lenny Bruce was probably the most famous example of that."

Cartoonist Cathy Wilcox agrees some of the best comedy comes from a serious place: "The joke is often born from cogitating on the awful. And I can take my task very seriously at times - for example, trying to persuade my government not to go to war."

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Based in Melbourne, Australia, Christopher Shen Consulting brings organisational psychology solutions to workplaces, helping people become stronger leaders and teams become better performers.

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