



Comedy: Stand-Up, Gay Male

by Tina Gianoulis

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Actor and comic Jason Stuart.
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Stand-up comedy is a form of entertainment where one performer stands in front of an audience and tries to make common cause with that audience by pointing out the ridiculous and humorous in the universal problems of everyday life. Stand-up comics balance on a fine edge between the funny and the offensive.

They can be social critics, prodding audiences to look at the unfairness and inequality in life and to rise above them with a laugh. They can also be part of that unfairness by using humor to make fun of women, gays, and ethnic groups, allowing some members of their audiences to feel superior to those who are the butts of the joke.

The dilemma is well expressed by Henry Machtey on the Gay Comedy Links website: "Stand-up comedy. Cracking jokes. Are you going to aim those jokes at people who are less powerful? or people who are more powerful?"

Too often, gay men have been the objects of hostile humor. Queer jokes, like female jokes and ethnic jokes, have long been a staple of straight stand-up comics looking for an easy laugh from audiences eager to assert their own heterosexuality in a world where it is often dangerous to be gay.

At the same time, however, perhaps long before the all-male Greek theater of the fourth century B.C.E., audiences have also had a fascination with gender-bending. During the "pansy craze" of the 1920s and 1930s, gay performers such as Gene Malin emceed nightclub shows in Manhattan that catered to predominantly straight audiences. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, long before gay liberation, Milton Berle often wore a dress and lipstick as part of the act that earned him the name "Mr. Television." Other beloved straight comics, such as Jonathan Winters and Flip Wilson, regularly wore drag, to the great amusement of their audiences.

In the 1980s, stand-up comedy enjoyed a tremendous growth in popularity. The lean economic years that led people to fill comedy clubs looking for laughs also seemed to bring out a mean streak in both performers and audiences. Comics such as Eddie Murphy, Sam Kinison, and Andrew Dice Clay made reputations based on hateful jokes aimed at gays, women, and minorities, and audiences of white men enjoyed the chance to blame their troubles on someone else.

However, along with these homophobic comics, a new generation of out gay comics began to appear, both in gay comedy clubs such as Josie's Cabaret in San Francisco, and, more and more, in respected straight clubs, such as the Improv and Caroline's Comedy Club in New York City.

The Tradition

There is tradition behind the emergence of gay male stand-up comics. Theatrical productions, from Broadway musicals to drag shows, have long been an intrinsic part of gay male culture. The emcee of a drag show, in stilettos and wig, has often been of necessity the most skillful of stand-up comedians,

calming a house of rowdy, drunk patrons, both straight and gay, while keeping the show running smoothly. Some famous drag performers, such as the legendary Ray Bourbon who performed in the 1940s and 1950s, included stand-up material in their acts.

Stand-up Comics since the 1980s

In the comedy clubs of the 1980s, gay comics began both to challenge and to embrace gay stereotypes. Straights in the audiences began to find themselves in the uncomfortable role of outsider, as gay comics turned the jokes around, lampooning homophobia itself, and telling "in" jokes about gay life. By the early 1990s, gayness itself had become almost fashionable and gays began to find themselves as characters in television sitcoms, notably NBC's *Will and Grace*, which premiered in 1997.

One of the performers enjoying the new visibility of gay comics is Jason Stuart. Born in New York and raised in Los Angeles, Stuart worked in the closet as a successful comic for several years. His coming out was a very public event, as he told the world he was a gay man on the *Geraldo* television talk show in the early 1990s.

Since then, Stuart's act has changed to reflect his identity, "Straights should know: It's the year 2000. If you let us marry each other, we will stop marrying you!" (from "Interview with Jason Stuart," in *SHECKY! A Magazine About Stand-up*).

Stuart's sharp wit has earned him acclaim not only from appreciative gay audiences, but also in guest spots on television shows such as CBS's *Murder, She Wrote*, UP's *Charmed*, and ABC's *Drew Carey Show*, and *Will and Grace*, and films such as *Kindergarten Cop* (1990) and *Vegas Vacation* (1997). In 2002, Stuart starred in Michael Gallant's film about relationships, *10 Attitudes*. In 2004, he released his first full-length comedy CD, *Gay Comedy without a Dress*.

Since San Francisco's thriving gay community was the cradle of gay comedy, it is perhaps fitting that one of the nation's best known gay stand-up comics has served on the city's Board of Supervisors, to which he was first elected in 1994. Tom Ammiano is a special education teacher who began his stand-up career in 1980. As stand-up was beginning to flourish around the country, Ammiano helped initiate a gay comedy night at San Francisco's Valencia Rose Cabaret, where he earned the nickname "the Mother of Gay Comedy."

He performed his popular political comedy in clubs and events all over the United States for more than fifteen years before running for city office. By 1998, he was President of the Board of Supervisors. In 2000, he came unexpectedly close to becoming the first openly gay mayor of a major United States city. Ammiano still performs at community events, and his sharp comic sense insures that his political speeches hold the attention of the crowd.

During the early 1990s, Canadian comic Scott Thompson became one of the best known gay performers in the United States, thanks to *The Kids in the Hall*, an outrageous sketch comedy show that appeared on various networks between 1989 and 1990. Thompson, the openly gay member of the *Kids* troupe, won a broad audience performing, often in drag, in skits that skewered middle class suburban values.

The Brampton, Ontario native followed his success in *Kids* with a stint as a gay assistant on the HBO comedy *The Larry Sanders Show*, and a role as an FBI agent in the 1999 film *Mickey Blue Eyes*, as well as with his own on-line sitcom *ScottLand*. Although some gays have criticized the broad comedy of the *Kids* skits as homophobic, Thompson insists his goal is to create gay characters who are three-dimensional and to increase gay visibility while resisting the establishment media's attempts to "sanitize" gays.

Other gay comics also formed performing troupes. Pomo Afro Homos, formed in 1991 by African American comics and writers Brian Freeman, Marvin K. White, and Djola Branner, brought a post-modern edge to gay comedy with controversial skits about the stereotypes and realities of Black gay life.

Funny Gay Males, originated in 1989 by Bob Smith, Danny McWilliams, and Jaffe Cohen (Eddie Sarfaty later replaced Smith), had a lighter tone, but still explored the gay experience with poignant hilarity. In 1995, the Males wrote down many of their routines and published them in a popular book titled, *Growing up Gay: From Left Out to Coming Out*.

Bob Smith had a major coup when he became the first openly gay stand-up comic to appear on *The Tonight Show* in 1994. Other well-known gay male stand-up comics include Frank Maya, David MacLean, Steve Moore, and David Sedaris (best known as a writer and National Public Radio personality).

Although the stand-up craze in the United States began to die out in the 1990s, stand-up remains a popular form of entertainment for those who need a bit of humor to help them through difficult times. At talent shows and open mikes at gay bars across the country, hundreds of gay comics take the stage to point out the foibles of both gay and straight society. A few of these comics have become well known in their communities, and fewer still have become nationally famous, but each has had a part in expressing the gay experience and making that experience more accessible to the straight world.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.