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CULTURE AND SOCIETY - 2013-07-12

## Savoring Comedy

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*When people plan a career with an idea out of the box, there are certain pushes and pulls in the family. But not so with this gentleman, no! He has had an extremely supportive family, who thought his idea of becoming a stand-up comedian would be the best plan for his future, more so because he was going to make people burst at the seams.*

*So, when I walked into the dimly lit hall where he was going to perform, the first thing which impressed me about Abish Mathews was his unassuming nature, which actually assured me of an interesting interaction writes TINAT ATIFA MASOOD*

**So when did you decide to become a stand-up comedian?**

I decided to become a stand up comic when I was in Class XI. Ever since I was a kid, my parents used to put me up on stage for fancy dress competitions, music competitions, plays and more. Even in school, I



was given the responsibility to MC a lot of events. The joy of making someone laugh was so great that I didn't know that there was a lucrative profession or there was an art form called stand-up comedy as such. I loved making people laugh, so I would crack or maybe improvise a few jokes whenever I would get an opportunity to MC a programme, 'cause I didn't know how things were at that point of time. So in Class 11, I got my first computer and with the advent of the YouTube and Internet, we were like "Wow, Robbin Williams, Robin Williams was one of the first comics I had ever seen and I couldn't believe he was playing to an entire audience by just talking and he was making people laugh. This is what I wanted to do. I didn't know there was an option like this at all. So Class XI, I decided this is what I wanted to do. At that time, I also used to be a singer for a rock band and I wanted to be a singer. Somehow, images clashed. Here was a person who was singing songs of love and also doing comedy simultaneously. However, during college, I did as much I could entertainment wise. Then I joined radio. My three years stint in radio, out of which two years I was doing comedy simultaneously. That was when it really took off. This was also around the same time when stand-up comedy as an art form, not as a profession started taking up in India, in totality. I didn't even know when I started off as a stand-up comic that I was already doing something with an art form which existed all along.

**Now, comic abilities are something that someone has or doesn't have? Do you think it can also be acquired?**

I completely agree! I don't know who said this but "Talent will last for a few years but hard work will live on for generations." Similarly, you can be naturally funny but you can also be very passionate about making people laugh. There are performers and then there are writers. Now, a humour writer needn't necessarily be a funny person in life. But there are techniques, tactics, there are ways, formats, rules when you write comedy when you go into the academia of writing comedy as such. So you just take that bit and you perform. That's your stand-up bit. So I think comedy can be learnt. The idea is that if you were not born funny but love to make people laugh, this can be done. There are sad people who go on stage and make people laugh.

**You have been performing endlessly since the time you took to the**

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**stage. So, which show do you think you would rate as your best?**

The greatest show I had ever done was at the Lady Sriram College in Delhi. The show was supposed to start at 6 pm. I came in around 3 pm. There was this huge queue outside the auditorium snaking all around the building. I asked someone what was happening. He said, "The queue is for you." So automatically I was like, "Great!" So when the show actually started, the auditorium was packed. The principal was very strict. There were teachers and others sitting in the first three rows. So, every time, they would look at the principal for approval and then laugh. By the end of it, I broke that wall, the ice that was there. I connected to her somewhere in the middle of the programme. So, when the show ended and I got a standing ovation, this very same strict principal came up to the stage and kissed me on the cheeks in front of the hundreds of students after saying that she would like to do something that all the girls here would like to do. Standing ovation yes, but this was just another level altogether!

**We find mostly men as stand-up comics, more than women. Do you think women stand a chance to crack into this art?**

Of course. There are so many women these days doing stand-up comedy. There are three very funny comics; Aditi Mittal, Niti Palta and Vasu Primalani, who are in the circuit right now and they have been doing great shows. I have been asked this question and they have been asked this question by a lot of people. The reason being there are more men in this art form and less women, is a personal choice. It's got nothing to do with gender. Because comedy is where I am describing things from my viewpoint, genderless! Abish Mathews is a male, 26 years of age, born and brought up in Delhi, shifted to Mumbai, parents are from Kerala; that's my viewpoint. That's got nothing to do with gender. Similarly, Niti, Aditi and Vasu have their own perspective. Ideally, I would like more women to come in but there are no reasons why there are not many women. If more women come in, it would be great. Especially, this is India; the perspective of a woman will be hilarious as well as insightful. Internationally too, there are women but even there men outweigh women for whatever reasons. It's a personal choice; some men want to take it up and some don't. Similarly, it is for women. I doubt if there is anything to do with gender.

**What advice would you give young aspiring comics or someone who really wants to take up stand-up comic?**

My advice to them would be to do as many open-mikes as possible and fail. My advice is go with a joke and try it out in two or three different venues. If it doesn't work, drop it. Number two would be do as many shows as possible; five minute spots, ten minute spots. Even if you are a great comedian, if you get an opportunity to do a spot, take it up 'cause you are churning up new material and the best judge of material is the audience. I am guessing Guwahati doesn't have a comedy circuit as such; there are hardly any young comics. I would urge the young people to do open mikes. We tried this in Delhi. There will be around ten people and they would try out five minutes each of their comedy in front of the mike. So out of those ten people, maybe two will like it. This creates a buzz. So, when they know something like this is happening in Delhi or in Mumbai, they are eager to travel there. I was very happy in Delhi. I was doing great there but Mumbai was untapped at another level. I went there and travelled to and fro for six months but finally shifted as I needed to sync myself in to grow. Mumbai is the entertainment capital; dive into it and grow as a performer completely.

**Have you had a problem with an audience, like you have failed to make them laugh?**

Yes, of course I have! A joke is crafted. The illusion is that it is coming impromptu. So when a joke is crafted, I might have tried this out in 10-15 venues and it's killed. Killed means it's great! This has made everyone laugh. If in certain places people are not laughing, it's because I as a comic have failed to judge the audience. Some comics are brave and they say, "Okay, this is how I am," and they get on. For me, I will try out a few material and see how the reaction of the audience is; how well they are doing; if it's political material that they like or sexual material that they like or innuendoes or anecdotal! In comedy, there is a term called 'Playing the Room'; you don't recite a joke, you play the room! If a room requires energy, you give them energy. If a room doesn't require that much energy, reduce it slightly. The idea is to play a room, work the room, interact with the audience; break that wall that this is not a play, talk to them, get some reactions from them, go back to your jokes. There is a lot of mix and match. There are some audiences who don't want to be messed. They want to be left alone; crack your jokes and go. Some audiences don't pay attention. Go there, break them, bring them to you. It's like a very semi-permeable membrane where I can come off and say stuff and ask them to generate but they can't do the opposite because I as a comedian have a right to heckle them down because

the audience is with me by the end of the show.

**Has there been a situation where you have had to do your bit and perform in spite of something sad which might have happened at home or elsewhere?**

This question had been asked to me when I was back in the radios. "You come everyday, 5am to 10pm, live radio and suppose something sad happens, how do you manage to do it?" And honestly, as cheesy or poetic it might sound; no matter how sad your day is, once I am on stage in front of the mike and I have made someone laugh, it makes me feel better than what the audience is feeling. The idea is that when I am on stage and my work is being appreciated, all that have happened at home are at home; here this is work!



People are paying to come and see me. I better not bring my family here. So, even if my life is in shambles, when people are laughing at my jokes, somehow I forget everything.

**Do you usually script your performance to a T, does it come impromptu or do you work on it as the show unfolds?**

Every stand-up comic works differently. So do I. I have my bits, my topics, my themes that I have worked on. So for example, my name, that is, Abish; it's a theme I have worked on for years by adding jokes, lines and making it crisper. So, I know there are certain jokes that I want to start with which will flow into the next joke. But then, mostly, I take the themes that I know I am going to talk about and don't script a few. I know what I am going to start with and what I am going to end with. I know of some bits that will follow because of the story. Rest of it, it will all depend on my interaction with the audience; what they give me. For example, if I have a gentleman in the audience who is a debonair kind of a person, I remember that I have a bit on debonair men. It is very important to keep myself entertained. So, if I am doing these kind of jokes for two years, I will expire them. So, if I have an hour, every year I am dropping twenty minutes and adding twenty new minutes. So, it's new stories every year 'cause stories get old referential wise, like Baba Ramdev is an old story. I can't use this. Political all goes off immediately; six months and it's got to go! Sometimes, even if I have expired that material, if someone is from that reference, it triggers that for me and I might bring in that set in..okay, like, let me tell you about this. So for me, personally, I know where it starts and where it ends. I know where it goes, improvise as much as possible!

**We all know the importance of mentors in life! Has there been someone who has motivated Abish Mathews?**

There have been quite a few people who have motivated me since the time I started comedy in 2009 March. That's the first time I invited 30 of my friends and family to come and watch my first show on stage, which was for just 10 minutes. I booked a venue and asked them if they can come see what I wanted to try out. That worked out really well for me. When I was not doing that great; I was just cracking jokes, doing my gigs as much as possible and nothing much was happening. As far as material and style was concerned and I thought these guys were 'wow', on the internet, there was Robbin Williams, Jonathan Winters, Bill Hicks, Russel Peter; I used to adore them. Whether I liked them or adapted to them is a different story altogether. But in personal life, my mother and my brother were the biggest motivators ever. I was literally on stage since the time I was born. My parents knew that I was going to end up on stage and this is where I belong. I wanted to do radio, they said, "Good". I wanted to do stand up, they said, "Go for it." There was no qualm of whether I was going to make money. Their belief was that if I am good at something, the money will come in. In Delhi, the open-mike circuit was not doing that great. But CJ came and blasted the circuit and then my friend Raghav Mandawa took it to another level by organising his own company. And in Mumbai, Veer Das exploded the scene. I won't call them motivators but call them key players. If they wouldn't have come, then the entire scene in general wouldn't have grown. And I as a performer wouldn't have grown either.

**What other comedy adventures have you planned for the future?**

I want to do THE TONIGHT SHOW.

**Do you think stand-up comedy has come of age since the time it took off in the villages?**

I have a totally different perspective on this. Stand-up comedy as in the English stand-up comedy is very new. However, comedy in India has lasted for centuries. There have been two short plays from the times of the Mughal regime; *Dastaan Gui* where two men used to sit in the durbar and make the king laugh. Comedy has been there since generations. Stand up comedy in Hindi, where the man used to stand in front of people and make them laugh must have always been there in villages. Stand-up comedy in English really took off after 2010; it grew. Before this, we probably have to go into history books, where we can verify the dates.

#### Do you have one particular theme you work on for every show?

"Son of Abish" is a show I have crafted in a way. It's like a best off. Since my work in 2010, this is my show which I have collected, which has a lot of recurring themes about me. And that is also how a lot of people recognise me from. This is a touring property. This is not an auditorium property. This has worked in Guwahati, in Pune, in Gurgaon, in Coimbatore. For me, a touring property will work in any given place in India. So, the theme is very rooted to being an Indian. It is about how diversified we as Indians are. I will maybe always start with me being a 26 year old South Indian guy; about Kerala and how things are different there. Then I will go into India in general. Then I will talk about my personal likes and dislikes. Then I will talk about my brother; about his marriage and inter-caste weddings. Then I will talk about cricket and Bollywood. The idea is that the show is multiple themed but it's all about India. So, even if I am talking about women, it will be very complimenting and not derogatory. If I am talking about the languages in India, it will be very complimenting. My shows are not about something pointed but just happy shows. There is another show that I am working on called 'Losing my senses', where I am performing blind, deaf and mute. The show is all about how I cannot see, hear and talk but still make the audience laugh. It's also about them going blind in the darkness. The idea is to exchange the senses. For example, if I am blind and you are deaf, let's play the room now. I am developing that but that will not be touring show, it will be an auditorium show.

#### Stand-up comedy is situational. So do you work on a new script every time for a new audience or a new venue?

A bit as we call it is a theme that we are talking about. A bit is crafted after it has been done for about 10-15 times at different venues in front of different audiences.



*Tinat Atifa Masood is an Actor, Director, Producer, Script-writer, National-level emcee, Voice-over artist, Writer, Poet, Counsellor, Philanthropist, blogger, Dreamer and a lover of people. She is based in Guwahati.*



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