

Stand-up comedy as rhetorical argument: An investigation of comic culture*

ANDREA GREENBAUM

Abstract

During a year-long ethnographic investigation of professional comic culture in Tampa, Florida, I discovered that comic narratives are consistently rhetorical, designed to persuade audience members to adopt certain ideological positions. Further, the narratives are constructed within a classical rhetorical framework, with comedians employing various discourse strategies. Comedians used Aristotelian notions of ethos, as they strived to create and maintain their "comic authority." They also utilized Isocrates' concept of kairos, adapting and tailoring their narratives to their particular regional audiences, and ultimately, the comedians worked within a Isocratean discourse paradigm, consisting of natural talent, praxis and theoria.

Stand-up comedy is an inherently rhetorical discourse; it strives not only to entertain, but to persuade, and stand-up comics can only be successful in their craft when they can convince an audience to look at the world through their comic vision. Stephen A. Smith, in "Humor as Rhetoric and Cultural Argument," supports this notion:

Aristotle's distinction between poetic form and rhetorical function seems to be joined in humor; making it one of the more effective means of argument and persuasion in popular culture. Indeed, humor is an inextricable part of popular culture, providing the common people with an insulated means of argument to challenge the dominant view of the social order. (1993: 51)

By challenging the social order, a stand-up engages in a subversive and confrontational form of discourse (Keough 1990: 171). And if we accept the premise that stand-up comedy is rhetorical in nature, then comedians function as (to use Bakhtin's (1968) words) a "Lord of Misrule," ritual

dismantlers of societal norms, racial and sexual stereotypes, and political dictums. The verbal art of performing stand-up comedy provides the same cultural function as carnival; its laughter is not restricted, "not an individual reaction to some isolated 'comic' event," but is the laughter of "all people" (Bakhtin 1968: 12).

Stand-up is not only a cultural form of resistance, as Bakhtin suggests, but a linguistic one as well. Soviet theorist Valentin Volosinov divides language into two stylistic poles: The first pole is termed "monologic" and is associated with the language of the ruling classes. This is, perhaps, what most would consider standard English. "Dialogic" style, on the other hand, mixes genres and is "full of voices of other people, full of reported speech. The dialogic style infiltrates boundaries and blurs established genres" (Zebroski 1990: 82–83). Dialogic style is more pluralistic, and "speaks" to a working-class audience. This style is a linguistic form of authoritative resistance. Likewise, the stand-up's rhetorical style is dialogical, designed to bridge the gap, the distance between orator and audience. In order to discover how a comedian goes about sealing that rhetorical distance, I spent a year (July 1993 through May 1994) studying the transient community of stand-up comedians at a comedy club, The Comedy Works, in the Tampa area. As part of my investigation, I conducted numerous interviews with professional and amateur comedians and observed, night after night, the way comedians hone their comedy craft in front of an audience. By adopting a stage persona and employing the standard narrative tools of comedy — incongruity, exaggeration, sexual hyperbole, mockery, reversal, mimicry, punning — comedians used their comic voices to control the rhetorical dimensions of their speech. Further, I discovered that comic speech, as it moves from thought to transcript to performance, is in a constant state of revision, bouncing off the needs and mood of the audience.

I have found that stand-up comedians, by employing classically rhetorical strategies — particularly, Aristotelean and Isocratean notions of discourse — achieve rhetorical authority in their performances. They establish this comic authority through the development of character, a persona that closely mirrors Aristotle's construct of *ethos*. Further, positioning themselves through dialogic styling enables them to connect emotionally and intellectually with their audience. Comics must also, by adapting their material to particular audiences and venues, anticipate rhetorical exigencies, and have an intuitive understanding of *kairos*, or situatedness. Finally, I will claim that comedians craft comic discourse through an Isocratean paradigm, which stresses natural talent, *praxis* and

theoria, and they employ these discourse strategies to close the narrative space between themselves and the audience they hope to persuade.

The six comedians profiled in this investigation, with the exception of David Gray (who is a young, promising performer), are professional comedians: they have numerous television credits, and nominations for national comedy awards. They tour regularly, working in multiple venues around the country. Killer Beaz, Blake Clark, Margaret Smith, Diane Ford, and Etta May were selected because I found them to be inordinately articulate, reflective, honest, and profoundly generous in their insights regarding their craft.

Ethos: Comic authority

[There is persuasion] through character [*ethos*] whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence; for we believe fair-minded people to a greater extent and more quickly [than we do others] on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt. (Aristotle 1991: 38)

While Aristotle's view of *ethos* relates to moral character, I think it is fair to extend the definition to include character which establishes a speaker's authority. The comedian must create a comic authority, a persona, which invites the audience to respond to the conversation by laughing. If the audience dislikes the comic, the jokes, no matter how well written or delivered, will not produce the desired result — laughter. An audience is likely to be unreceptive to the humor of a comedian who is perceived as hostile, particularly if that hostility is not part of the comic persona (as it is with Andrew Clay, Denis Leary, and the late Sam Kinison). Also, the more antagonistically a comedian reacts to heckling (a challenge to his or her comic authority), the greater the chance of his or her routine spiraling into disaster. Performers, if they are to be successful at establishing their authority, must engage themselves with the audience and, by doing so, put themselves at verbal risk. Female stand-up comedians must work harder to establish and maintain their comic positions because as women they have been socially indoctrinated not to engage in verbal roughhousing. Deborah Cameron and her coauthors, summing up Robin Lakoff's view of women's speech patterns, argue that:

Women are brought up to think of assertion, authority, and forcefulness as masculine qualities which they should avoid. They are taught instead to display the

'feminine' qualities of weakness, passivity and deference to men. It is entirely predictable, and given the pressures towards social conformity, rational, that women should demonstrate these qualities in their speech as well as in other aspects of their behavior. (Cameron et al. 1988: 76)

They point out that women's passivity in language is perpetuated generationally, since girls imitate their mother's speech, as well as other feminine role models. Further, Paul McGhee (1979: 201), in his psychological study of humor, concurs that, "for a female to develop into a clown, joke-teller or story teller, she must violate the cultural expectation that females should not aggressively dominate mixed-sex social interaction."

Feminist comedian Diane Ford (four-time nominee for a National Comedy Award) acknowledges that to participate in the male-dominated arena of stand-up comedy, and employ the skills of verbal jousting, women need to overcome the socially induced proscriptives against verbal aggression. She argues:

I think that's why a lot of female comedians are gay. I mean they've already bucked the biggest social mores. They're lesbians. Women are not raised to express their sense of humor. They're raised to laugh at men's sense of humor. So in order to find your sense of humor, expressed in front of people, you have to be a very independent spirit.

Ford cultivates her authority by positioning herself as a feminist. At the beginning of her act she asks the audience:

Do we have a lot of feminists here tonight? One, two, three? Just me? You say you're a feminist, every man's keeper's going off. "Oops! Gotta go! Not the consciousness raising comedy. Tell a dick joke!" Feminism shouldn't scare you. There's nothing about feminism that should scare anybody. The search for equality is something we all need. What's it gonna take for all the women to stand up and scream. "I'm a feminist. I'm searching for my equality." It's not enough that women make sixty cents on every man's dollar, and still have to do the housework. If that's not enough to make you scream, "I'm a feminist. I'm searching for equality," how about the fact that every time you complain about something you're called a nagging bitch. Well, listen to this: They could make pantyhose that won't run, and they won't fuckin' do it! Feminism scares men because it's an angry issue. They don't like angry women. Women are not raised to be angry. When we're little we're told it's not nice. It's not pretty. Little girls don't. That's why when we get angry it scares the shit out of them.

By establishing herself as a feminist, Ford takes a risk: on one hand, she becomes the "authority" on women's issues, and the women in the audience respond to her as "one of our own," but at the same time, she chances alienating the men in the crowd. She overcomes this dilemma by encasing her distinctly feminist discourse within what is traditionally considered to

be a masculine rhetorical style, which is linear, sexually explicit, and aggressively delivered.

The means by which comedians develop their *ethos* is by establishing a comic "voice." Margaret Smith, a stand-up comedian in her late thirties, sees a correlation between authority and ability, manifested by the creation of the comic persona:

What happens is, when you first start doing comedy, before you have a voice, you write a lot more . . . The first three years is spent developing a voice. Where you can sit down and write for yourself. It's sort of trial and error. You're kind of finding out who you are up there. And that continues to grow over the years.

She describes her first experiences as a stand-up as "horrible," primarily because she did not have the confidence to carry it off:

I had all these ideas, and then I wrote them down, and then I realized that to pull anything off you needed confidence and that the overriding factor in any of my beginning performances was terror and fear and . . . Someone who is totally afraid isn't going to be funny, because the audience can't get over your uncomfortableness. So they really are uncomfortable with your suffering. So I was suffering.

When I questioned whether it was actually her confidence or her material that needed further development, she responded, "Maternal that didn't work my first year, when I brought it back two years later, it killed. I just didn't have the confidence to deliver it. And confidence is experience."

Eta May, whose comic persona is that of a white-trash housewife turned comedian, argues the same point: "I know kids who are going up on open mike night who are shitting their pants, and they ask me for advice and I say, 'Confidence is a very appealing thing.'"

Without confidence, or "assurance," as Isocrates refers to it, a speaker is unable to be rhetorically effective: "[L]et him stand up before the crowd and lack one thing only, namely assurance, and he would not be able to utter a word" (Isocrates 1992: 295). Twenty-eight-year-old comedian David Gray demonstrated the importance of comic assurance in response to a heckler. When a patron interrupted Gray in the middle of a joke about gays in the military, Gray responded quickly: "Really, Sir. I didn't bring my English to Drunk dictionary tonight." Later, he was interrupted again by a woman who questioned Gray about all the activities he claims to have done that day. "Ma'am," he countered. "It may come as a shock to you, but all the things I say on stage are *not* necessarily true." The audience exploded in laughter and applauded his verbal acuity. Gray had managed to maintain

his comic authority' by subtly turning the joke back on the woman — something he claims is very difficult for a comedian to do, since, "even while you put the audience down, you need to maintain your likability."

Dialogic style: Constructing *ethos*

A primary way in which comedians establish and maintain their comic *ethos* is by strategically aligning their discourse to conform to the dialogic style Volosinov described earlier in this paper; that is a style which mixes voices, questions authority, and embraces class distinctions, with the comedian aligning him or herself with the lower classes, even while ostensibly making fun at their expense. For example, Etta May establishes her character as a working class "gail":

Beverly Hills people are like Hyde Park people [a wealthy Tampa community]. Got any rich people here tonight? [A few claps] Got your rich ass in your Mercedes and go home. Give me white trash night tonight. Hell, if white trash were against the law, half of us would be on death row! Tonya Harding would be our leader.

Another way in which May connects herself with the audience is by using self-deprecating humor. Her costume is intentionally unflattering, designed to draw attention to her rather large figure. She told me during our interview:

It's the first thing that hits you. For fat people, when you walk into a room you kind of have to let everybody know, "Hey, I know I'm fat, let's move on." You need to put an audience at ease, and the way to put an audience at ease is to give them authority, and make yourself less "them."

Etta May, more so than the other comedians I observed, playfully cajoles her audience when they don't respond as enthusiastically as she would like: "That was piss-poor, Ladies. Is this your night out or what? Goddamn Hyde-Park bitch! Loosen up a little bit. I'm gonna break my parole just to kick the shit out of you. You ready? Ready girls?" The women in the audience shout back, "Yes!" and May continues with her show. May realizes that her stage character can assert herself in ways that the off-stage Etta May cannot. "I'm like a big walking ventriloquist doll. I can say things that if I said them to somebody I'd get the shit beat out of me, but I can get by with so much. My [personal] is much fatter because I have to believe it."

The audience also talked back to her, in true dialogic fashion, often shouting enthusiastically and murmuring consensual comments ("She's

right!" "Don't I know it!" "It's true!") among their table mates. Etta May attributes this to her appearance:

Waitresses tell me that when I hit the stage, people will start ordering food and start drinking. I bet they sold a lot of beer. People drink a lot more, and they'll order that second plate of nachos, and they'll get that food. Because I'm saying, it's okay. It's okay. We're big fat, let's live our lives and go on.

Likewise, Southern comic Killer Beaz ingratiate himself to the audience by showing what he calls his "Achilles' heel" — growing up in southern Mississippi. He begins his set with the following joke:

My real name is Truett S. Bensusen Jr. Thanks Dad! I spent most of my life in Jackson, Mississippi. Thanks Dad! If you have never been to Jackson, Mississippi, God, save up! Save up! Go for that second honeymoon. Bring jumper cables, get in free. Take a condom and trick 'em.

He tells me he begins his set by letting his audience know his background so they say, "'Bless his heart!' They know that I'm one of them." His comic style is friendly and conversational. Many of his jokes begin with a colloquial "fellas," "Ya'll," "Ladies," and he gives the illusion that he is just a "good ole Southern boy," sitting on his porch, spinning his yarns. While most of Beaz's humor is relatively "clean," he occasionally throws in more sexually explicit material — something most comedians recognize will earn them easy rapport with an audience. "I was on Oprah Winfrey. She just laid there. Thank you!" Or: "Man, I hate those ribbed condoms. They burn your hand!"

David Gray employs his dialogic style by working with material saturated with pop-cultural references — television shows, media events, commercials, and rock music:

I saw Ross Perot on T.V. today ... I think he needs an interpreter or something. Half the time I don't know what the hell he's saying. "Mr. Perot, what do you think about the economy?" "Well, the economy is like a big cow. You either kill it tonight and have steak, or have milk for the rest of your life." "Whaaaat? He has that subtle way of insulting someone so they're not really sure they've been insulted. "Mr. Perot, what do you think about Hillary Rodham Clinton?" "I've never been known to say anything bad about a woman. Even if she could cut corn through a fence." "Whaaaat?"

I used to write for commercials. I got fired, though, because my commercials were too realistic. I got fired by Keystone beer. Maybe you saw my commercial? "Wouldn't it be great if you shared a jail cell with a three-hundred-pound Hispanic man and instead of a poke in the butt, he gave you *her*?" I got fired over that ...

Well, at least it's better than those commercials for Nic-a-derm. When they say it's a patch about eight thousand times. It's a patch. Patch. Patch. Patch. Patch. Patch. Patch. Patch. Nic-a-derm. The Patch. It releases nicotine in your body so you can gradually work your way off cigarettes. Which is a good idea. But about this for other things. What about crack-a-derm? It slowly releases crack into your body. What about this for other disorders. Say you're an over eater, they'd have, like, the snack-a-derm. It slowly releases mayonnaise in your body or something. Say you're a nymphomaniac you know, they'd have like the dick-a-derm. But I guess you wouldn't wear it on your arm.

Imagine having MacGyver for a boyfriend? "No sex tonight, MacGyver. I don't have my diaphragm." "That's okay. I have a Dixie cup and some jumper cables."

By referencing images and associations which he knows his audience is familiar with, Gray bridges the distance between himself as orator and the audience as his listeners. He also positions himself as a comic authority since the audience knows the cultural references he discusses, they can recognize the cleverness of his inversions, and it is his *re-visioning* of the ordinary which elevates him as a comic authority.

Kairos: Adapting the narrative

But the creation of *ethos* through dialogic styling is not enough to sustain comics through an hour set, and they must be prepared to adapt their discourse to meet the needs of the audience. David Gray's experience putting down hecklers, maintaining his authority, and still remaining "likeable," illustrates this classical rhetorical contrivance — that of *kairos*, meaning timing, due measure, or proportion in individual circumstance. While comedians' "texts" are certainly memorized, they must be prepared for the exigencies of the moment, which is part of what makes live comedy so exciting in the first place — the idea that anything can happen at any moment. Phillip Sipiora (1990: 126) helps to articulate this Isocratic notion:

The rhetor must anticipate rhetorical exigencies; he or she can never know the particulars of a discourse situation until actually situated within it. And it is precisely because a rhetor cannot anticipate every important situational circumstance that he or she *must* carry a flexible attitude into any given rhetorical situation.

A comedian, by having the flexibility to adopt his or her script to situational circumstance, by applying *kairos*, is able to strengthen his or her comic authority and maintain control of the room. It is this grasping of the "propriety of time — when to speak and when to hold his tongue" that

distinguishes the gifted professional comic from the amateur (Plato 1956: 53).

Etta May begins her routine:

You know I'm sick of the whole health craze. I don't want to hear about bran cereal. I don't know about you, but bran cereal gives me the shits. (Etta May looks to a young male, seated in the first row.) I'm gettin' you hot, ain't I Skeeter? I must look pretty good to some kid from Lutz, you know what I mean? (She pants at him.) Don't touch what you can't afford. Baby, lovin' me is worse than a Vietnam flashback. Hey, Skeeter, you got yourself a little Barbie with you, don't you? Girls, I just want to pop off your head. Do you see this little girl right here? Do me a favor Barbie, stand up for a minute. (The young woman hesitates, but Etta May has the audience chanting "Bar-bie! Bar-bie!" and the young woman stands up.) Turn around, I'm gonna beat you up in the parkin' lot. Damn, you're petite Barbie. What size do you wear? (The woman doesn't respond) Barbie? This question tough for you, Barbie? It's not algebra, sweetheart. You're not real smart are you, sweetheart? You know, she's got a good lookin' field, but nobody playin' at anything in it. (The young woman answers that she wears a size 5.) I crap bigger than you! Kiss my ass!

During our interview I asked Etta if she always does her Barbie and Skeeter routine, since there is no guarantee that an attractive woman will be sitting in the front row. She responded, "Usually I do it. But if there isn't [an attractive woman], you have to be prepared for that. Any question I ask the audience seems like they can answer me a million different ways, but they can't. They can only answer in a certain way. After doing it awhile, there's no way they can answer you to mess you up."

Wherever she is performing, she personalizes the routine by making local references. For Tampa, she refers to Lutz as a place where stupid people live, and Hyde Park as a metaphor for Tampa's elite. During our interview, May explained that before she gets on stage she asks the club managers,

Where do stupid people live? Where do rich people live? That's lower people hitting on authority. They love it when you smash the rich people. My show, as you see, I start off with real basic stuff. Easy stuff. It gives them time. One, they see this woman walk up, and I'm not the normal type of comic. Not normally what they see. And they're a little afraid for me, and so you have to hit 'em with real quick short jokes. And bring them into your world.

May believes that a good comic, like a strong orator, needs the skills to reach an audience composed of all age groups:

I can sit there and say something and this person is pissing in their pants and the guy next to him is [smiling]. That's what makes stand-up comedy so dangerous. You

have to make it universal. Half my audience doesn't have kids. Did you see? I had seventy-five and eighty-year olds. And next to them were twenty-year-old kids who just got their license to drink. How do you relate to that? How do you give each of them something to relate to?

David Gray recognizes this rhetorical convention when he writes new material, saying, "Sometimes I get a little down on myself because I'll write something, and even though it's funny, I'll get down on myself because I'll think that's a great joke, but it's dated. That's a joke I can only do for another six months. Or it's regional. I can't do it everywhere." This realization, that comic discourse, if it is to be rhetorically effective, must also remain malleable, is critical to the stand-up comedian.

Natural talent, *praxis*, and *theoria*: Crafting comic discourse

Isocrates believed that in order for students to excel in oratory skill, they must:

If first of all, have a natural aptitude for that which they have elected to do; secondly, they must submit to training and master the knowledge of their particular subject, what it may be in each case; and finally, they must become versed and practiced in the use and application of their art (1992: 293)

These rhetorical components — natural ability, *praxis*, and *theoria* — are present in the construction of comic discourse, and I will explore each of the elements in turn.

Nearly all the comics I interviewed for this article described their comic talent as innate and "natural." Killer Beaz told me: "I've always been funny. I was born bone-crushing funny." Diane Ford likened her comedy career as a calling. "It's like the priesthood. You know, you're called to it. You don't have any other fuckin' choice."

Second to natural talent, Isocrates advocated *praxis*, the practice of one's craft to oratory perfection. He writes in the *Antidosis*: "Again we know that men who are less generously endowed by nature but excel in experience and practice, not only improve upon themselves, but surpass others who, though highly gifted, have been too negligent of their talents" (1992: 295). In comedy, the rule is to get on stage as much as you can, wherever you can, to polish your jokes, timing, and stage persona.

Originally known as the Vietnam Vet Comic, Blake Clark was first propelled to national attention when he made his appearance in 1982 on *The Tonight Show*. Blake points out how essential practice is to the

development of maintaining comic authority. On the night of Clark's performance, his timing seemed off, his pacing was slow, at times, even laborious. Clark was aware of his faltering performance and commented to me:

Last night was the first night I did comedy in about a month. Last night I pulled a comedy ligament. Tonight I sort of digressed a little bit, and went too long. This is why you have to keep doing this. Like Jay Leno says, "The more you do it. The better you become, the better you become, the more you do it" It's funny. You forget so much of your act if you don't do it.

David Gray was also keenly aware of the need to keep revising and practicing his material, molding his jokes until the verbal rhythm is flawless — the perfect setup and punch. He was still working on polishing a joke he used in his routine the night I saw his performance. The joke goes as follows:

My favorite commercials are the ones they show late at night for that spray-on hair shit. I've never seen a grown man get so excited about spray painting his scalp. . . . Why don't they come in red and blue so that old people can join gangs?

After the show, Gray told me:

The thing about the spray-on hair is kind of new. There's a line missing somewhere in there. Everybody knows the commercial. It kind of has that popular culture appeal to it. Everyone's seen the commercial with the spray-on hair. It's just a matter of how I need to twist it. Now the only thing I got is that "they should make them in red and blue so old people could join gangs." Which is a nice twist. But not enough. It needs more.

Comedians need to practice their craft, and for that they need to perform in front of an audience. But they also, as Gray illustrates, need an understanding of structure, to know when a joke is missing a line, or if the rhythm or beat is off, while Isocrates placed *theoria* at the bottom of his triarchy, he still believed in having a sound theoretical base on which to build one's oratory skills. An orator's need to understand structure is echoed by Plato, through Socrates, who cautions Phaedrus that "every discourse, like a living creature, should be put together that it has its own body and lacks neither head nor feet, middle nor extremities, all composed in such a way that they suit both each other and the whole" (Plato 1956: 53). While a theoretical understanding of how a joke is composed is essential to comedy writing, that alone will not make a comedian funny. What distinguishes

amateur comedians from professionals is the lack of structure in their narrative. Professional comedians often view themselves as storytellers and, as such, realize that their discourse must conform to expected modes of narration — beginning, middle, and end. One device that comedians use to reinforce their comic structure is a “call back,” which is a phrase or a line that the comedian used earlier in his act. The call back’s purpose is, in effect, to remind the audience of what was said earlier, functioning as a rhetorical marker, and is used ultimately to punctuate the comedian’s act — somewhat like an essay’s concluding paragraph, designed to reinforce closure.

Killer Beaz’s call back is “Save up!” — a phrase he uses at the beginning of his act, sprinkles throughout his routine, and then closes with:

I ate lunch in Lutz today. *Save up!* We went to a restaurant that was so cheap there were no salt or pepper shakers on the table. The middle of the room had a salt tick. The menu was scratch and sniff. So was the waitress.

“Save up!” becomes an intentionally ambiguous call back, used repeatedly by him and the audience, who become “in” on the joke, and shout the phrase back to him.

All right, men. Get this. Ya’ll, ya’ll. My wife had herself waxed for swimsuit season. Now I’d never heard of that. Guys, they put wax on their pubes and smash ‘em out by the roots. *Save up!* Ladies, what kind of candles are ya’ll makin’? Honey, that wick looks familiar. How is your sister?

Man, ya’ll should see your faces when the checks are comin’ out. AAAAAH. You should have *saved up!*

He tells me that he started using “Save up!” about seven years ago. As usual he opened with his line about taking your family on a vacation to Jackson, Mississippi, when an audience member shouted back, “Save up!” He realized that the call back was funny, and it stuck. For Killer Beaz, the phrase has become an integral part of his persona.

Likewise, Blake Clark, uses “thin the herd” as his call-back phrase, a reference to his philosophy about eliminating stupid humans from the gene pool:

If you’re an adult, and you don’t know how a seat belt works, you don’t deserve to survive the crash. We don’t need you. It’s time to *thin the herd*. This used to be taken care of naturally. The natural laws of evolution. Darwinian evolution at its most

basic. You either kept up, or you were left behind. The great herbivores on the plains of Africa. The stupid ones, who didn’t know, they were just pushed to the edge of the herd to be eaten by lions, and tigers, and bears. Oh my! Thereby ensuring that the intelligent genes would carry on, and the stupid genes died out. Thereby ensuring the successful ongoing of the species.

On a hand-held hair dryer, there’s a warning tag. “Do not use this while in the shower.” If you don’t know this, we don’t need you. It’s time to *thin the herd*.

Diane Ford’s act is structured thematically, and she has named her act, “Anatomy of a Woman.” On stage she displays a giant poster outline of a faceless woman, whose body is sectioned off, labeled like a beef chart. Her breasts, for instance, bear the phrases “Baby Feeder” on the left and “Male Ego Feeder” on the right. She explains the structure of her act to the audience:

The reason I mention that last job, is that is where the germ of the idea for the show came from. I used to have to sell beef by pointing out a beef chart. So I thought I could explain a woman by pointing out a woman chart. We’ll start at the outside and work our way in.

By working within the Isocratic paradigm, comic narrative is functionally, and therefore rhetorically, effective. By believing that their own comic talent is innate, comics develop a sense of confidence enabling them to present themselves in the stand-up arena. Further, by appreciating the theoretical construction of comic narrative, and practicing the material to rhythmic perfection, comedians develop a discourse that effectively fills in the rhetorical space between orator and audience.

Conclusion

Comic narrative is rhetorical in nature; it is inherently designed to persuade an audience to adapt a particular world view, and by working within a classically rhetorical framework based on the principles of *ethos*, developing and maintaining comic authority. *Kairos*, adapting the routine to meet the exigencies of the moment, and crafting their narratives to conform to the Isocratic model, stand-up comedians construct their own rhetorical setting, positioning themselves as the authoritative voice on cultural dictums, social mores, and political agendas.

Note

Correspondence address: greenbau@chumba.cas.usf.edu

* All interviews were conducted between July 1993 and May 1994 at the Comedy Works, Tampa, Florida.

References

- Aristotle
1992 *On Rhetoric*. Kennedy, George (ed.) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail
1968 *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press.
- Cameron, Deborah, Fiona McAlinden and Kathy O'Leary
1988 Linkoff in context: The social and linguistic functions of tag questions. In Coates, Jennifer and Deborah Cameron (ed.) *Women in Their Speech Communities*. New York: Longman.
- Isocrates
1992 *Isocrates Vol II*. Trans. George Norlin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Keough, William
1990 *Punchlines: The Violence of American Humor*. New York: Paragon, 1990.
- McClue, Paul
1979 *Humor: Its Origin and Development*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman & Company.
- Plato
1956 *Phaedrus*. Trans. W. C. Helmbold and W. G. Rabinowitz. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing.
- Sipiora, Phillip
1990 *Keiras in the discourse of Isocrates*. In Vitanza, Victor and Michelle Ballif (eds.) *Readings of Rhetoric: Phonic, Graphic, Electronic*. Arlington, Texas: Rhetoric Society of America.
- Smith, Stephen A.
1993 Humor as rhetoric and cultural argument. *Journal of American Culture* 16: 2, 51-63.
- Zehroski, James Thomas
1990 The English department and social class: Resisting writing. In Lunsford, Andrea A., Helene Moglen, and James Steyn (eds.) *The Right to Literacy*. New York: MLA.