

Playing it for laughs

A By JOHN FILION

At Yuk Yuk's comedy cabaret, the Wednesday night crowd is growing restless. The evening's second act, a very short, bearded, bespeckled young man named Howard is midway through a hopeless John Wayne impersonation that is taxing the basic good nature of his audience.

As if oblivious to the tremendous bursts of indifference greeting his punchlines, Howard drones on. "Wall, I wuz ridin' around the range, ya see . . ."

Suddenly the embarrassed silence is mercifully broken by a burst of pre-recorded protest, one of many fail-safe mechanisms reserved by Yuk Yuk's management for use at such critical junctures when heckling cannot be far off.

A great hue and cry followed by shouts of "Crucify him! Crucify him!" pours through the loudspeakers. A relieved crowd erupts into lusty applause and laughter.

Helpless, Howard glances uneasily toward the large wooden cross being thrust at him menacingly from the wings. "I was just getting to the good part," he protests meekly, then retreats offstage to await an auspicious moment to slide out the exit.

For committing the ultimate crime of subjecting his audience to several minutes of unfunny monologue, Howard, of course, deserved no better. People come to Yuk Yuk's expecting to laugh. And comedians unable to deliver their own punchlines can expect to have a definitive one provided for them.

Few Yuk Yuk's comics perform so abominably that they need to be silenced in mid-monologue (one or two a night at most). Your typical Wednesday night show might feature an equal number of comic failures and successes along with an assortment of up-and-comers with varying degrees of talent and technique. And for every crucified comic who vows never again to grace Yuk Yuk's small stage, several more wait in the wings, anxious, for one reason or another, to stand before an audience and present themselves as comedians. They can't be doing it for the money — the night's feature performer is the only one paid and even he receives only 25 per cent of the gross from a \$2 admission charge.

Since last June, when Yuk Yuk's manager-emcee Mark Breslin established the club in a basement room of a community centre at 519 Church St., he has permitted an average of one new comic a week to crash into showbiz there.

"I feel an obligation to provide a forum for people who think they're funny," says Breslin. This sense of duty extends to the point of allowing unknown acts to perform before an expectant, paying audience.

"I don't believe in auditions," he explains, adding almost philosophically the "people should have the freedom to fail."

Yuk Yuk's aspiring funny-men can be classified into several types, according to Breslin.

"There are the people who want a career

in show business. Then we have the person who's been told he's very funny by all his buddies and wants to get up and try it on stage, usually on a dare. And then there are people who want to work out personal problems. There are a fair number of those."

"I've had people tell stories from their lives without any obvious punchline. One guy got up and told how his wife had been burned to death. He didn't know where to take it from there, so he broke into a rendition of Swanee River. It was extremely funny — in a surreal way."

Less surreal, but equally pathetic, was the impressionist who, impeded by a hairlip, rendered indistinguishable an assortment of voices from James Cagney to Ray Charles. Not only did the characters sound alike, each one spoke with an impediment.

To salvage some semblance of humor from such moments of agony, Breslin employs a variety of techniques to yank faltering comics off with a flourish. Least subtle of these is a hook extended from beside the stage and looped around the performer's neck.

More elaborately conceived methods include "the penalty box." It calls for a referee to appear onstage, literally blow the whistle on the offending comic, slap him with a penalty for boring the audience, and

banish him to a corner of the room for two minutes.

In extreme circumstances, a seductively dressed "cigarette girl" will stroll through the crowd selling rotten eggs and tomatoes. This, method guarantees a prompt evacuation of the stage.

The only performer to defy the hook was Oscar, a Yonge Street habitue known in some circles as Crazy Oscar. Crazy Oscar was recruited by one of Breslin's talent scouts at 3 a.m. in a Mr. Donut as he captivated patrons with weird and wonderful tales of his exploits as an aluminum siding salesman.

"We brought him down to the club," recounts Breslin, "and before he went on each time he would show me notes and assure me he had a monologue prepared. But invariably he'd get up there and start insulting the audience and we'd have him carried off."

The last time out, Crazy Oscar adamantly refused to cut his act short and had to be hauled off by three burly comedians.

Although such unpremeditated strangeness is always a big hit with the Yuk Yuk's crowd, craziness per se is far from being the sole reason for the club's enormous success. (And it is so successful that those wishing a seat had best arrive before the 8.30 p.m. playing of God Save the Queen which signals the show's opening).

Apart from providing the audience with a few malicious thrills, the atrocious performances make the stronger acts stand out by comparison and remind any critics in the crowd that doing a stand-up routine is no piece of cake.

Shows are headlined on a rotating basis by any one of about eight comedians, each with proven ability to complete a set without evoking pity or putting the audience to sleep.

Most are former classroom comics for whom Yuk Yuk's serves as a sort of