



Comedian Juris Strenge seeks targets amidst audience

Loneliness of the stand-up comedian

Being funny for a living no laughing matter

By Steven Mazey
Citizen staff writer

It's 11:15 p.m. and a tall, slim, bearded man is earning his living in the darkened basement of the Beacon Arms Hotel.

Juris Strenge is standing on the stage at Yuk Yuk's Komedy Kabaret, trying to make people laugh.

Scanning the room, he gleefully spots a pair of moving targets: a man and woman who arrived late and are slowly making their way to a table near the stage.

"That's a nice fur coat," he says to the woman, pausing carefully before he delivers the follow-up.

"Somewhere there's a rat saying 'where's dad?'"
Bullseye.

"So what are you going to do, sue me?" he asks the woman, who is laughing along with the rest of the crowd.

He looks at her male companion and grimaces.

"I'm not gonna say anything to him. He's got tattoos."

The audience loves it. And Juris Strenge is happy.

Strenge, 29, is from Ottawa. He's one of only about 50 people in Canada who are making a full-time living at the lonely art of stand-up comedy, says Howie

Wagman, manager and co-owner of Yuk Yuk's, the only club for stand-up comedians in Ottawa.

For those 50 people, it's a life of almost non-stop travel to a blurry series of bars, Yuk Yuk's clubs and college campuses from Vancouver to Prince Edward Island, constantly and sometimes painfully aware that they must live (and die) by their wits.

Though the audience tonight loves Strenge, he knows that the exact same material could fall flat tomorrow.

"Stand-up comedy is an absolutely naked art," says Wagman.

"You're up there alone, with no one to rely on. If you bomb, that silence is deafening. I've seen guys come off a stage absolutely crushed."

That's one of the reasons there are so few people doing it, he says.

One of those people is Norm Macdonald, also from Ottawa, who is on the bill with Strenge.

The night goes well for Macdonald, too, though his style is different from Strenge's.

He steps onto the stage and, staring into the lights, launches straight into his routine, seemingly unaware of the crowd.

"I was going to give up smoking," he says, "but then I heard the government was planning to give heroin to cancer patients. So I thought I'd hang in there for a while."

Citizen photos by Chris Mikula

His material is topical and intelligent. Though most of the laughs are long and loud, a joke that was a hit at the early show seems to fly high above the heads of the people at the late show:

Macdonald is doing a vignette from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* as it might be done by Archie and Edith Bunker.

"Beware the oides of Mawch," he squeals in a great Edith Bunker imitation. But the blank faces and near-silence that greets the material quickly tells Macdonald that the only Caesar this crowd knows about comes in a glass with a celery stalk.

"Never mind," he says, moving quickly onto more successful material.

In an interview after the show, Macdonald says one of the first things comedians have to do is "get a sense of the level each crowd is at."

"If something isn't working, it doesn't matter how well it went over somewhere else. You'd better find something they will laugh at, damn fast."

He once appeared at a London, Ont. club during lunch, when the audience consisted of "three little old ladies having a pension party. I scrapped most of my act and tried to remember every old Bob Hope joke I could think of."

Like Strenge, Macdonald started out on amateur night (held Thursdays, after the regular show) at the Ottawa Yuk Yuk's and refined his act until he and Wagman thought he was ready for full-time comedy.

Strenge and Macdonald have made good in less than two years. They both earned more than \$30,000 last year for being funny at clubs like Yuk Yuk's, where the admission fees range from \$5 to \$8.

But the money doesn't always come easily.

"I've been in some real dives" says Macdonald, 26. "Especially at bars, you've got a room full of drunks who will kill you if they don't laugh. I've had guys come up on stage and threaten to hit me. People have thrown things. They're sort of daring you to make them laugh."

Audiences are even tougher on women, which may explain why there are only three professional comedienne in Canada, says Wagman.

"Audiences are hypocritical. I



Norm Macdonald before hometown crowd at Yuk Yuk's

think they resent a woman who has the guts to get up on stage by herself. The men will yell at them to take it off, that kind of thing. They don't care if a man swears, but if a woman does, they don't like it."

But Wagman says he can sense pretty quickly if a comedian — woman or man — has what it takes.

"About one in 100 have it. With Norm, I could tell right away he had the timing, the delivery and some brilliant material. Most people need a lot of grooming before they can go on full time. Norm hardly needed any."

Strenge, he says, is "really likeable. That's why he can get away with the insult stuff. He's relaxed and friendly and audiences really like him."

He says good comedians — however different their material may be — have several things in common.

After graduating, Strenge worked as a professional photographer, doing comedy in his spare time.

Three years ago, he performed at Yuk Yuk's amateur night, and after a year of perfecting his act there, decided to try it full-time.

Strenge says he occasionally

tries out his new jokes on friends or other comedians.

"But to really see if it works, you still just have to try it with an audience. If it doesn't do anything after three or four times, you scrap it."

His parents, he says, "thought I was crazy to give up the security of a full-time job. But they're pleased now that I'm doing well."

For Macdonald, stand-up comedy "sort of just happened".

"My friends always told me I was funny and it went over well, so I decided to stick with it."

The worst part of being funny for a living, says Macdonald, who now lives in Toronto, is "always being alone in these strange cities, wandering around with nothing to do, waiting for the show."

He and Strenge write all their own jokes. Macdonald says he spends about two hours a day writing at a desk, searching magazines, newspapers and television for potential targets of humor.

"When the material you've written gets a big laugh, it's a great feeling."

Strenge and Macdonald say that no matter how well they do in Canada, the goal of almost all professional comedians here is to go to the United States.

"They have 10 times as many clubs. That's where the big money is, and it always will be," says Macdonald.

"In Canada," says Strenge "Yuk Yuk's is a great training ground, but there's no place for the next step, nothing that will give you huge national exposure the way the American shows like Carson or Letterman can."

They both hope to go to the U.S. within a couple of years. Several Canadians already have.

Toronto comedian Larry Horowitz, who Wagman says is one of the top comedians in Canada, seems to be on the verge of making it big in the U.S. He has appeared on the Rivers program and is booked to appear again.

"It's a sad comment that we still have to go to the states," says Horowitz. "But it's a fact. The Americans are a bit more open minded. If you're good, it doesn't matter where you're from."

"They have minds like steel traps and they all use the language well. They have to know exactly how to word their stuff to get the biggest laughs. I've seen a joke bomb and then do really well when the words are placed differently."

It's 11:40 p.m. and Strenge is searching the room again.

His eyes light up as he spots a pair of young women with pink lipstick and thick, frizzed hair.

"How many mousses went into that creation? A herd, I'm betting. Nice earrings. Do trout follow you when you go swimming?"

Once again, the victims are laughing as loudly as the audience.

Strenge first realized the benefits of making people laugh while he was attending Sir Robert Borden High School in Nepean.

"I studied theatre arts to meet girls. But I knew it was for me when I was in a comedy and got a lot of laughs."