JOHN TOMAC

FUNNY OR DIE

A *SUCCESS* EDITOR ATTEMPTS TO CONQUER HER BIGGEST FEAR: PERFORMING STAND-UP COMEDY.

BY JAMIE FRIEDLANDER

"Next up is the very funny Jamie Friedlander!" *Oh my God. I'm next. It's really happening.*

I'm a mess. It's mid-March, and I'm at the Dallas Comedy House stand-up open mic night, due to take the stage for the first time, and my nerves are getting the best of me. Sweat drips down my face and my heart beats faster than it ever has. My editor approached me about this terrifying challenge six weeks ago, because, in his words, I'm one of the "more reserved" people on staff. This challenge would be infinitely more difficult for me than anyone else, he reasoned. In fact it would require pushing myself in ways I've avoided all of my life.

My stomach twists itself into knots. I barely ate anything all day. The last six weeks of pure, unadulterated anxiety morphs into panic. I signed up for the open mic last week, but now I seriously doubt whether I'll actually be able to get up onstage. This is so far outside my comfort zone that even my close family members and friends tell me they doubt I'll actually follow through with it.

I'm tightly wound. I'm anxious. I'm pathologically risk-averse. I rarely crack jokes unless I'm with close friends or family. And when I do make jokes, they don't typically result in roaring laughter. I'll happily settle for a smirk.

For me, telling a joke is one of the most vulnerable, out-of-control moments I can imagine. I suspect I would enjoy the feeling of making a room full of people laugh, but my need to have everything in perfect order—*under control*—overshadows my desire to feel that particular satisfaction. Funny people are comfortable with the unknown. I don't have that comfort. I feel confident when the world is predictable, when I've left nothing to chance. The idea of standing in front of a room, putting myself out there, not knowing how people might react, strikes fear deep inside me. But people watch stand-up comedy because they want to be caught off guard. They can't know what's coming next. For me, this is completely unnatural.

I'm a perfectionist in everything I do. I got straight A's in graduate school even though I didn't need to. I want the wedding I'm planning to be perfect in every regard, when deep down, I know it doesn't matter what shade of neutral the bridesmaids' dresses are. I loathe uncertainty, and those close to me know it. I'm the one constantly nagging my family members and friends about our plans so everything can be organized and perfect. I can't help it—I crave finality and closure in all things. These can be good traits for a magazine editor. Not so much for a stand-up comic.

I accepted this challenge hoping comedy would be the cure I needed—to help me feel comfortable when I'm out of control. I know

I can't go through life with everything perfect, because life is full of surprises. It's just that those surprises always seem to cause me anxiety. So I thought that by forcing myself to feel as out of control as possible, it might help me feel better about everyday things being out of control, too. But now it's time to do it. And as much as I planned for all of this, I'm not sure I can actually follow through.

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When I first agreed to take on this story, I went home and watched comedy routines from Jim Gaffigan and Bill Burr, two of my favorite stand-ups. During one of Gaffigan's sets, I had to hold my stomach from laughing so hard. He cracked a joke about how admitting eating at McDonald's is almost as bad as admitting to supporting dog fighting. I thought about why his joke made me laugh so hard. It's because he found the vulnerable aspect of him eating McDonald's (that people judge him for it), flipped it around and thought of the most absurd comparison possible. That incongruity somehow sparks laughter.

Comedians take sad, embarrassing moments and point out the irony in them. But when I first started brainstorming material for my routine, nothing in my life struck me as particularly ironic or comical. Sure, I think there is *something* funny about the fact that I eat gluten free because I have celiac disease, but what exactly? It took me five weeks to actually think of the joke there. And I got help from a local comedian.

A few days after agreeing to the assignment, someone showed me a Ben Stiller Q&A from *Parade* magazine. The journalist asked Stiller: Did you ever want a career as a stand-up comic, like your dad had?

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"Never!" he said. "To me, stand-up comedy, standing in front of people and trying to make them laugh, is probably the hardest thing you can do in show business." Somehow this was intended to encourage me.

When I initially saw how naturally my comedy heroes Gaffigan and Burr elicited laughs from me on my couch, it seemed like something I might be able to do. They speak so confidently that it seems effortless. When you watch them, you don't think about how hard it might be for a person to stand in front of strangers, holding nothing but a microphone, trying to be entertaining. You think they're up there just talking to you. It seems accessible.

But after speaking with countless comedians and watching numerous stand-up specials, I realized that being a stand-up comedian requires much more than just seeing the humor in everyday events. There's a reason you didn't cry from laughing so hard when you read Gaffigan's McDonald's-dog fighting joke just now—it's all about inflection, timing, buildup and delivery. The more I watched comedy, the more I realized not only is it in an art form, it's one of the most difficult art forms to master.

"It takes comics seven or eight years to write real jokes," Dallas-based comedian Paul Varghese tells me. Other comics say his timeline seems about right. Dan Naturman, a New York City-based comedian, told me it takes him a month—sometimes even a year—to get a joke "as perfect as I can get it." Steve Martin famously said that in his 18-year stand-up career, he spent 10 years learning, four years refining and four years in wild success. A killer one-liner takes hours upon hours, and failed jokes upon failed jokes. That sounds like my worst nightmare.

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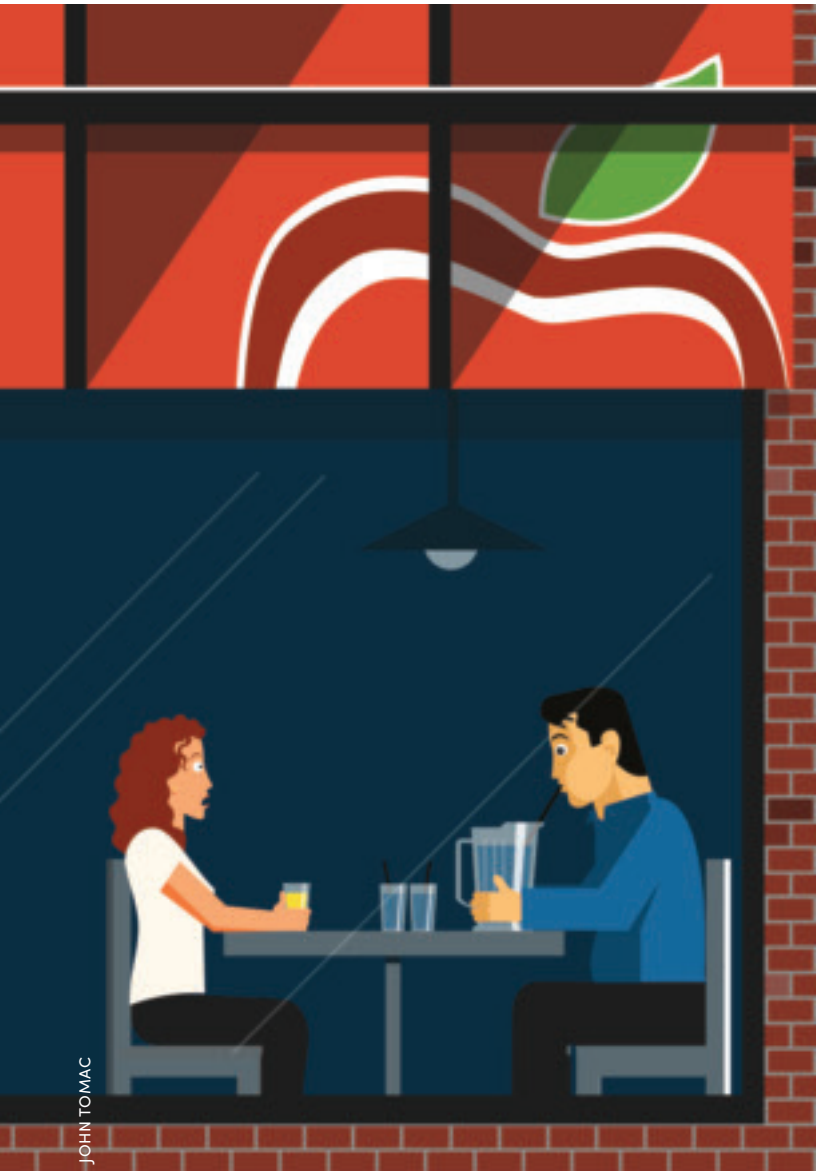
My nerves were high when I first took on this challenge, but as I continued researching, speaking with comedians and watching stand-up comedy, it got worse. I had just six weeks to craft material that would evoke laughter from strangers when top comedians take years to get one joke perfect. About three weeks in, I consider asking my doctor about Xanax. The entire challenge felt so overwhelming.

At some point I realized that stand-up comedy made me so unbearably anxious because it is the ultimate form of judgment. If you make a mistake at work, you can own up to it and move on. If you say something that hurts someone's feelings, you can apologize or say that "isn't what I meant." But in stand-up comedy, there is no gray area. You spent hours writing and refining and then people either laugh or they don't.

I admire stand-up comedians. Their desire to bring joy to people outweighs whatever nervousness, self-consciousness or fear they might feel.

I ask Varghese why he thinks everyday people find stand-up so terrifying.

"I've psychoanalyzed it a million times—I've always thought about quitting," he says. "The reason I think it's intimidating to people is



JOHN TOMAC

because it's so judgmental." He talks about the documentary film *Comedian* in which Colin Quinn says stand-up comedy is "the closest thing to justice."

In an attempt to muster some of the courage I need to deal with that judgment, I sign up for a seven-week improv class at the Dallas Comedy House.

While chatting with Varghese at a dingy bar one afternoon—I notice comedians love dive bars—I tell him how I genuinely want to know what it feels like to be onstage doing stand-up. I want to be able to plan for it, of course.

"It's lonely," he says. "That's why so many people do improv—because you always have somebody behind you to catch you if you fall."

After several weeks of improv classes, I see exactly what Varghese means. I don't feel nearly as anxious to perform improv as I do stand-up. If I say something on the spot that isn't funny, my partner will carry the scene. In improv, there's always an opportunity to pick yourself up after falling. In stand-up, it's just you and your failed joke.

I also begin to genuinely enjoy improv because it helps me relax. I leave class feeling rejuvenated, light on my feet and free of worry. I'm not alone in finding it therapeutic for my anxiety. University of Pennsylvania psychology professor Gordon Bermant published a paper in *Frontiers in Psychology* on the connection between improv and anxiety, "Working With(out) a Net: Improvisational Theater and Enhanced Well-being."

I ask Bermant why improv helps people with anxiety.

"The short answer is because you can take risks in a setting—that is to say you can expose yourself in ways you wouldn't dream of doing otherwise—and be sure the group you've done that in will hold you. Your fears of being called out or your fears of being humiliated or your fears of being teased mercilessly, all of that goes away in the improv setting."

During my seven-week class, I slowly accept the possibility of embarrassing myself. In week one, I begin my first scene with a safe concept, "You know, Michelle, you're my only daughter and it's about time you had grandchildren for me," and my hands tremble with fear. By week seven, I enter a scene in which my partner is a dominatrix, and I'm fighting back excited laughter.

Bermant echoes Varghese's sentiment about how the two forms of comedy contrast. He says stand-up, "is as cold and harsh as improv is warm and welcoming."

In my improv performance held at the end of our seven-week class, I didn't execute very well. I spoke too quietly and fumbled in one scene when my partner started talking about ascots—I knew they were menswear-related, but wasn't sure exactly what they were. But failing during this show didn't feel nearly as daunting as failing during my stand-up routine.

Improv helped me slowly gain the courage I needed to step onstage and perform stand-up. I even scheduled my first open mic at the Dallas Comedy House for right after my last improv class because I thought I'd be upbeat and pumped.

Several weeks before my first scheduled open mic, I meet with two other local stand-ups, Paulos Feerow and Shahyan Jahani, at the Dallas Comedy House for help with my material. Jahani shows me the "joke" in a funny story I often tell about how I went on a bad date, only to later find out the man was on Ecstasy. I noticed the man talked a lot and drank a ton of water at dinner.

Jahani says the "joke" is saying, "He drank a lot... like a lot... of water." His idea is so clever and something I never would have considered. *My mind doesn't work like a comedian's,* I think. *I'm definitely going to bomb.*

I also run the story by Varghese—as he fiddles nervously with a straw—maybe we aren't so different, he and I.

Varghese helps me see one of the "jokes" in my story as well. "Just imagine that drug transaction," he says as reggae music emanates from the bar's speakers. "Like, 'You going to a cool rave, dude?' 'No... just dinner at Applebee's.' "

After meeting with these three comedians, I realize gathering the courage to step onstage is only step one in about 50 steps of courage it takes to be a stand-up comedian. It's a complex art form that requires constant writing and rewriting, hours in front of the mirror practicing and comfort with regularly embarrassing oneself.

"I remember in my first three months, I didn't get a single laugh, but I got this weird high from being onstage and performing," Feerow tells me. His lack of insecurity and self-consciousness amazes me. I'm rife with both things. That's the difference between stand-up comedians and everyone else—they don't mind making complete fools of themselves week after week for that one satisfying moment when they make an audience shake with laughter.

I doubt I'll feel the weird high he mentions. I'll just be ready to get it over with.

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I am supposed to go onstage in 20 minutes. I take a shot of peach schnapps and Fireball cinnamon whiskey at the bar. I hate drinking alcohol, but I've got to find some way to steady myself if I'm going to go through with this.

I walk into the open mic theater, nervously awaiting my turn. A few of my fellow improv classmates smile at me in encouragement. The host introduces me. It feels like my feet are bolted to the floor, but there's no turning back now. I slowly get my legs moving and walk onstage.

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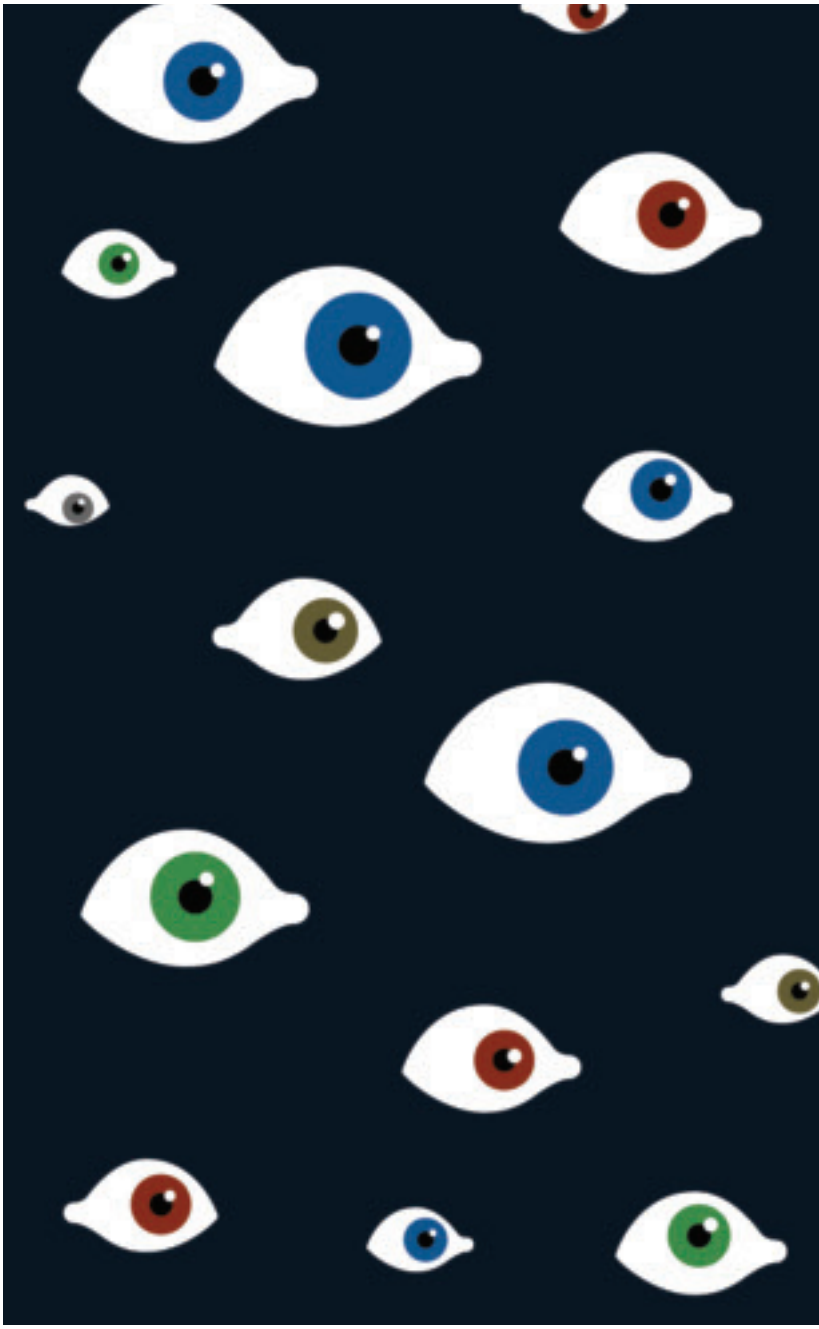
The blinding lights beat down on me and my armpits drip with sweat. *Thank god I wore a navy shirt that won't show sweat stains.* But then I worry: *Are my pants too tight? Did those shots I took a few minutes ago turn my cheeks red?* I've never felt this self-conscious in my life. Roughly 30 people stare at me, eager and ready.

I was told to make eye contact with somebody in the audience, but I can't see anyone's face clearly because of the blinding lights. Panic ensues. I fumble with the microphone. What should I do? Stare out into the distance? Direct my gaze downward? I didn't plan for any of this.

I tell myself to calm down, to pretend I'm looking into my bathroom mirror.



"Hi everybody," I manage to nervously spurt out. My words sound surprisingly confident. "Full disclosure, this is my first time doing stand-up comedy."

Everybody claps and cheers. The audience seems supportive and friendly. Even if I'm not hilarious, at least they know it's my first time. Deep down, though, I know they will be harshly judging every word that leaves my mouth.

"A few years ago, I went on this really awkward date," I begin. "My autistic roommate opened the door for my date because I was still getting ready. Then my roommate goes: 'Oh... I didn't expect you to be *Asian*.' " There's laughter. "So clearly the date was off to a great start."

More laughs! Not the whole audience, but at least half. *Phew. This might be OK.*

"The date gets even worse—he didn't pick a restaurant," I say, the bright lights still beating down on me. "On top of that, I have a gluten

allergy. I may seem like your typical annoying gluten-free diner, but I actually have celiac disease, so if I eat gluten... I will die." Laughter fills the room. "We eventually decide on Applebee's. No joke." More laughs. My confidence grows.

"The first thing I notice about my date is that he's really chatty. The second thing I notice is that he drinks a lot... like a lot... of water." Silence. It's my first joke to bomb. *Shake it off, Jamie. You're almost done. You've got this.* I don't pause to wallow in my failed joke. If I do, I know the insecurity will overcome me and I won't be able to continue my routine.

"I talked to this guy a few years after our date, and it turns out he was on Ecstasy," I tell the audience. Laughter erupts, and not just from the handful of people I invited to see me perform. "Seriously, it was the worst date ever. So naturally, we're getting married."

I hit my biggest joke. I feel the rush. It's hard to describe: Something I thought of is making strangers laugh. Total approval. This single moment feels better than an entire day going exactly as planned.

I keep going. "I wonder, if he had to take Ecstasy to shake his nerves for a first date with me, what it will take for him to walk down the aisle." People laugh even more. Then I place the mic in its stand and quickly walk out of the theater. A man I don't know pats my shoulder, smiles and says "good job!" on my way out.

My mind is reeling. *People actually laughed at my jokes!* The awful anxiety leading up to the performance was worth it. I see why comedians like Feerow say they feel a high after they go onstage. I feel it right now.

While doing the research for my article, I came across a poignant quote from comedian John Oliver: "Stand-up comedy seems like a terrifying thing. Objectively. Before anyone has done it, it seems like one of the most frightening things you could conceive."

Before stepping onstage, I would have agreed with Oliver. I was horrified of performing stand-up comedy. During my peak moments of anxiety, I barely ate and fought with my fiancé over nothing.


JOHN TOMAC

But having done stand-up, I now see the fear was entirely in my mind; it wasn't based in any reality. It was my distaste of the unknown fueling the fear. I failed to regularly remind myself that the worst-case scenario would be that I got no laughs. And so what? Life would go on. Nothing would change. I would just have a bruised ego. As soon as it was over, it all seemed so silly.

Once I was onstage conquering the unknown head-on, I discovered I could handle it. I spoke with surprising ease—my co-workers and family members said they couldn't believe how natural I seemed.

In addition to my open mic at the Dallas Comedy House, I performed at a hole-in-the-wall Caribbean restaurant close to the office so my co-workers could come watch. Oddly enough, the second open mic went much worse than the first one. I got only a few measly laughs (mostly from my co-workers), and I sounded hurried and nervous. This time, I went first, the audience didn't laugh much at anyone, really, and there were only about 15 people watching. I learned that, in comedy, the room matters immensely.

Had you told me a month before that I would perform stand-up in front of my co-workers and barely get any laughs, I would have been mortified. But when it happened, I didn't panic. I sat back down with my co-workers, sipped on a Jamaican Me Crazy and breathed easy about being done with my stand-up comedy challenge. The performance wasn't the best-case scenario, and that was fine. Life went on and we had something to joke about at work.

Halfway through this assignment, I regretted it. While hiking one day, I thought about the challenge and began frantically texting my co-workers and family members for reassurance. "What if I bomb and it's awkward at work the next day?" I texted one co-worker. "What was I thinking agreeing to this?" I asked my fiancé. I panicked. My chest felt tight and I couldn't catch my breath. I thought there was no way I could ever perform stand-up comedy, and I didn't know what made me think I could.

This changed me. I'm still anxious, and I still like being in control, but I've learned the merits of mellowing out. I can cope better now with feeling out of control.

A few weeks after completing the challenge, we found the venue we wanted for our wedding. My fiancé and parents wanted to wait to book it until we had done a food tasting and thoroughly read the contract. I, on the other hand, wanted to sign the contract immediately. I took a step back, looked at the situation and realized that the worst-case scenario would be that another couple booked the venue in the meantime, and we'd find another. Life would go on and the wedding would still be wonderful *enough*. I don't think I would have had this perspective before performing stand-up.

When I think about going up and conquering my biggest fear, I feel unstoppable, confident and empowered.

I recently attended a stand-up open mic to watch a friend I met through improv class perform. I ran into Jahani, my stand-up coach, on the way out, and he asked me whether I was going onstage. I laughed and gave out a relieved, "No way."

When I think about going up and conquering my biggest fear, I feel unstoppable.

I don't think I'll be doing much stand-up in the future, but I did sign up for Level 2 of improv (the lesser of two evils) after my challenge ended. And I regularly attend stand-up open mics throughout the Dallas area now.

Oh, and I haven't had any schnapps since. ◆

FRIEDLANDER IS THE ASSOCIATE EDITOR OF *SUCCESS*.