



Whether they're working an open mic at a seedy bar or performing on the *Tonight Show*, these Wellesley comedians see stand-up as 'the most fun you can have on Earth.'

# Anything for a Laugh

Photographs by John Mottern

By Lisa Scanlon '99

E

erin Judge '02 stood on stage at Comix in Manhattan, cracking jokes about everything from date night at Whole Foods to the surprising connection her grandmother drew between bisexuality and tofu.

Midway through her set, she turned her gimlet eye on women's body-image issues. "I used to worry about that stuff, but now I accept what it is that I look like, you know, which is a supermodel," Judge deadpanned, "... from 500 years ago, OK?"

"I've got the red hair, the pale skin, the hips. I'm basically your whole circa 1508 hottie package up here. So what I did is, I got rid of the scale in my bathroom and replaced it with a giant shell," she said, drawing the outline of a half shell in front of her and assuming the serene expression of Botticelli's Venus. The 200-person audience laughed and cheered.

Judge was one of six alumnae performing last September in "Wit and Wellesley," a New York comedy show coproduced by Amanda Beals '96, herself a stand-up comedian. Stand-up isn't a typical career for a Wellesley woman (or any woman, for that matter), but the alumnae on stage that night—as well as Wendy Liebman '83, a national headliner based in Los Angeles—are irresistibly drawn to the mic.

"I'm just so in love," says Jane Condon '73, one of the "Wit and Wellesley" performers, who recently achieved national recognition when she competed on NBC's *Last Comic Standing*. Condon's sentiment about stand-up is echoed by Judge, Beals, and Liebman, committed comedians who spoke with *Wellesley* about their craft.

Stand-up comedy allows these alumnae to speak their minds, surprise and connect with a crowd of strangers, challenge themselves and their audiences, and even help people (including themselves) forget their cares for a time. That's not to say it's all laughs—there's definitely a gritty side to being

a comedian. Late nights in dingy bars, struggling for the attention of a distracted audience. Years of no pay and little recognition, fighting to get a foothold in an industry where young white men rule. But it's worth it, they say. Anything for a laugh.

"One hundred thousand people in Brockton. Actually, it's 95,000 now, because 5,000 are in the witness-relocation program. We have a Holiday Inn with a big sign: 'Have your next affair here.'"

—Jane Condon '73

It's hard to get a straight answer out of Jane Condon about when she first starting doing stand-up. "I'm gonna be a little vague, honey bunch, because I've been doing this a long time, and it's a little embarrassing how long I've been doing

"Thanks to Wellesley, I can almost pass for Greenwich. I got there, I'm thinking, oh my God, everybody's going to be a snob. They're going to hate me. But you know what, the people at the supermarket, if I forget my pearls, they lend me some."

—Jane Condon '73

it," says Condon, whose jokes center on her blue-collar roots in Brockton, Mass., and her life in WASPy Greenwich, Conn., with her Republican husband and two sons. Condon, a former journalist, finally cops to more than 15 years.

But her experience paid off last year when she was selected to compete on *Last Comic Standing*. While most comedians work their way up through comedy clubs, Condon has been more likely to perform for the Harvard Club of New York, volunteer groups, and charity events. "The truth is, I'm really a country-club comedian," Condon says. So competing on television was a wild ride for her.

Condon spent all night in line on West 23rd Street in Manhattan last March, just for a chance to compete. She and some other comedians bought \$6 chairs from Rite Aid and tried to keep



warm while waiting in line. "This lady's walking along the street where we're all milling, and she said, 'Affordable housing! Affordable housing!' And we said, 'We're not homeless! We're here for the auditions.'" Condon slept in her car overnight. "Well, it's a Lexus, so don't feel bad for me," she says. It was "like a bad flight on British Airways to London."

Condon finally made it in at 11 A.M. and was really worked over by the judges. "I'm not huge on the New York comedy-club scene. . . . So they just kept poking and prodding, to see if I was worthy," Condon explains. But in the end, of the 267 comedians who auditioned in New York, Condon was one of 32 who were chosen to go to the New York finals. Then Condon was chosen as audience favorite and went to Los Angeles to compete in the national semifinals. That's as far as she advanced, but it was enough. "Every down-and-out club I've ever been to, every restaurant I've ever done, this just made it totally worthwhile," Condon says.

It has been a tough path, particularly when her sons were young. "Sometimes if it were a local show, I could read the kids a bedtime story, rush out and do the comedy, and come back, but then I was a basket case at breakfast," Condon says. "It's not set up for moms." She also acknowledges the difficulties of just being a female comedian. "A lot of comedy shows are three comedians: an open, a middle, and a headliner. Maximum, they'll put one woman on the show. That's our problem," she says. Then again, being the only mom from Greenwich on the comedy circuit made her stand out, she says, which was an advantage.

And there's a lot that she gets back from being a comedian. "In comedy I can be angry and upset, which are not emotions that are encouraged in Connecticut people in general, or in any women," she says. The other gift of comedy, according to Condon, is being able to let out her childlike side. "It's like being in a sandbox," she says. "It's the most fun you can have on Earth."

**"I had an emotional experience the other day, you guys. A friend of mine called me up. She wanted me to be her maid of honor. I couldn't stop crying. Because I don't want to do it."**

—Erin Judge '02

When Erin Judge graduated, she assumed that she'd work for a year, and then go on to get her doctorate in American studies or women's studies. But like many of her classmates, she ran face-first into the bleak post-9/11 job market and ended up taking a string of temporary jobs in Boston. "I was pretty antsy by the time evening came around," she says, so she started going to comedy shows almost every night. Judge had some comedy experience from performing in Wellesley's improv troupe and co-hosting "Last Call," the College's late-night student comedy show, and it wasn't long before she was doing sets herself. After about six months, she was accepted to graduate school—but by then she was hooked on stand-up and decided not to go.

These days, Judge works at Harvard, but spends her nights performing all over Boston, writing and performing in a sketch-comedy troupe, traveling around New England for gigs at colleges, and competing in stand-up contests. She's also getting national attention: Later this year, she'll appear on Comedy Central's *Live at Gotham* TV show.

Home for Judge is the Comedy Studio, a small club on the third floor of the Hong Kong Restaurant in Harvard Square. The Comedy Studio is known for experimental comedy, its priority for promoting women and minority comics, and potent scorpion-bowl cocktails. The fact that Rick Jenkins, the owner, puts so much stock in comedians with different perspectives resonates strongly with Judge. "I think stand-up comedy is an opportunity to really impact the way people think about things while also entertaining them," Judge says. Her feminist outlook comes across strongly in many of her bits, as when she skewers *Cosmo* or American wedding traditions.



**'I was reading in *Cosmo*, "10 Ways to Drive Your Man Crazy." No. 4 was "make time to have sex with your man." Ohhhh! Thank you, *Cosmo*! You know a great way to make your man crazy? Don't make time to have sex with your man. You know another way? Once a week, take one of his socks . . . throw it away. Dear *Cosmopolitan*, I've got this clock that ticks real loud, and I hid it under the floorboards. It is slowly driving my man crazy.'**

—Erin Judge '02

And as a feminist, Judge is frustrated that there aren't many female comedians, and that for the few out there, it's hard to get recognized on the same scale as men. "It's ludicrous that no woman advanced in the Boston Comedy Festival two years in a row. . . . That is obscene," Judge says. (Both she and Amanda Beals competed in the preliminary rounds last October.) "There are special ghettoized opportunities in the comedy world for women, but women don't have parity with men when it comes to the major festivals or competitions," says Judge. "And it's a double-edged sword: When women do make it into the festivals and move on to the finals in the competitions, it's often very casually dismissed as tokenism by male comics . . . and

other female comics, too." The only thing to do about it, in Judge's opinion, is to play the game until you're respected enough to be able to make changes of your own—and support as many women as you can along the way. But in the meantime, "I'm addicted to getting up on stage and telling jokes to people," she says. "I have to do it. And if the system is what it is, then I guess I'll take it."

**"[My comedy] is all stories. There is very little fabrication. I mean, the world is just so rich. Every moment is interesting."**

—Amanda Beals '96

Back in 2003, Amanda Beals had a decidedly unfunny job. She worked for an organ-procurement company in Boston, visiting the families of the recently or soon-to-be departed, and trying to convince them to sign over their loved one's organs for use in transplants. "It just made me wildly uncomfortable," Beals says, and she wound

up leaving the job. She had a master's in human development and psychology from Harvard, and experience in counseling and psychiatry research, but she wasn't sure what step she should take next—so she went to Wellesley's Center for Work and Service. When alumnae career counselor Folly Patterson '85 pressed her on what she really wanted to do, Beals finally confessed to wanting to try stand-up.

Beals took Patterson's advice and took a stand-up class in Cambridge, Mass. She became a clinician at a school for troubled children, but her passion was for comedy. She started working the door at the Comedy Studio (where she met Judge) and began performing.

Getting started was tough, Beals says. She remembers one show early in her stand-up career at a large family restaurant in Malden, Mass. "They put me right in front of a big-screen TV with a hockey game on, and there was a pool table to my side, and then there was a mic. Then it's like a comedy hostage situation, where people in a restaurant are being held

hostage to hear comedy," Beals says. "That's when you sort of question. What decisions have I made that I'm not on the first page of the Wellesley alumnae magazine, celebrating another grant from Microsoft? Why am I fighting over mozzarella cheese sticks at a family restaurant in Malden?"

But she never *really* had any doubt. "There's this element in comedy about just being able to speak the truth completely as you see it without any censoring," says Beals, whose comedy is largely based on her own life experiences. One set might cover her internet dating misadventures, her thoughts on the fattest man in the world, and how she was unwittingly dressed up as Captain Kirk by her father.

Two years ago, Beals decided to take her act to New York, where there are more opportunities to perform. She found a flexible day job, and now does stand-up at night everywhere from sex-toy shops to lounges. She also produces the weekly New Jack Showcase Series at Comix with Becky Donohue (the six-alumnae "Wit and Wellesley" show was part of this series), helping other comedians get a leg up. The move to New York hasn't been easy—"I've taken a huge hit financially, that stresses me out the most," she says—but not doing it wasn't an option. "So many people do tremendous, outrageous, extreme things when they leave Wellesley, and I wanted to be that person, too. And I knew that in order to do that, I had to tip my life upside down," she says.



**'Have you all seen the show on the fattest man in the world, Manuel Uribe? Manuel Uribe's from Mexico. Twelve hundred pounds. That's like a Geo Metro with internal organs. So I'm watching this show, and I'm getting pissed off, because Manuel Uribe has a girlfriend, and he has a job that gives him health insurance. He sells jeans in his hacienda. I? I went to an Ivy League and make \$8.50 at Barnes and Noble and live with an illegal alien in Queens.'**

—Amanda Beals '96