

# **Pretend the World is Funny and Forever**

**A PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS  
of  
COMEDIANS, CLOWNS, and ACTORS**

**Seymour Fisher  
Rhoda L. Fisher**



**PRETEND  
THE WORLD  
IS FUNNY AND FOREVER:  
A Psychological Analysis  
of Comedians, Clowns, and Actors**

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*State University of New York  
at Syracuse*



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***To our children, Jerid and Eve, and also all of the Lilliputians  
we have known who helped us to glimpse the absurdities of the “big people”***

# Preface

We have devoted this book primarily to studying comedians, clowns, and other funny people. We set ourselves the task of understanding the origins, the motivations, and personalities of those who make humor. Secondly, we were interested in exploring the factors that shape actors and other public entertainers.

Without exception, we all laugh and joke and say funny things. Humor pervades human spaces. Universally, people find that it helps to interpret events by coding them in funny metaphors. There is no question but that seeing life as funny has protective value. There is evidence that it softens trauma; that it oils difficult human contacts; that it enriches what we tell each other; and that it debunks aesthete, de-personalized stiffness by reminding us that all humans, no matter what airs they put on, are made of "body stuff."

People seem to have such a hunger for funny, humorous input that they have commissioned a whole class of people, called comics or clowns, to help fill them up. These comics occupy prominent and influential positions in just about every culture. They are certainly powerful figures in the Western world where radio, motion pictures, and television have magnified their impact. People like Will Rogers, Charlie Chaplin, Fred Allen, Milton Berle, Woody Allen, and Johnny Carson clearly have used humor to shape attitudes in large segments of our population. Some have become directly involved in important political matters. Others have skillfully used comic images to make all sorts of things seem right or wrong or illogical or sentimentally acceptable. Comics are forever telling us that certain types of people are silly; that various commonly accepted customs do not make sense; and that no one set of values is more trustworthy than any other. In one recent television appearance a well-known comedian did the following:

1. He made fun of a prominent politician.
2. He ridiculed the American advertisement establishment for ballyhooing products that supposedly render people less disreputable and dirty.

3. He highlighted a number of common difficulties and paradoxes that occur between marriage partners.
4. He raised doubts about the value of being honest in today's world.
5. He vividly made it clear how much we fear death.

He obviously bombarded his audience with his perspectives on a wide gamut of issues. Indeed, in his own way, he preached a series of minisermos reflecting his view that the world is in a fairly absurd state. His comedy communicated powerful messages to his audience.

The power of the nonprofessional comic in informal social groups is also impressive. As he jokes and kids, he often becomes the center of attention. His performance draws people to him. He titillates and stimulates. He makes people laugh. He may set the mood for an entire evening. It is true that some people may not enjoy him or may feel irritated with his performance, but there is no doubt that they react strongly. Few are neutral about the comic when he goes into action.

Our intent in writing this book is to build an understanding of the people who create humor and are expert at making people laugh. Who are the comedians and clowns of the world? Where do they come from? Why are they so dedicated to tickling funny bones? In what ways are they unique? The comedian and the clown have been conspicuous figures in just about every culture that has ever existed. They obviously have strong catalytic functions. We considered it an important task simply to learn about their dynamics. But we were also convinced that if we could learn more about the expert producer of humor we would simultaneously generate new understanding of humor itself. We were hopeful that novel ideas would surface if we matched up new information about the humor maker with what is solidly known about humor.

Clowns are funny people who have been around for a long time. Their makeup and costumes are almost universally recognized. We were intrigued to learn that clown makeup was originally plain old mud that was smeared on. The clown declares to the world that he is comfortable with mud rubbed into his skin. He identifies himself with mud. This is but one example of the numerous ways in which the funny man dramatizes that he is close to the things that other people consider worthless, devalued, and even bad. He wears mud like others wear decorations of honor. As we see later, the clown covered with mud feels strangely armored and virtuous. A clown that we interviewed actually said that when he dons his makeup and clown outfit he feels that he is better and morally superior to the person he is without his clown regalia. The clown finds in his mud veneer a puzzling strength and inspiration. Phyllis Diller, a modern comedienne, expressed her sense of the comic's closeness to the devalued stuff of life in her reply to a question concerning how she achieved fame and recognition. She said (Wilde, 1973, p. 223): "I ate shit! . . . I still take a spoonful a day for fear I'll lose my taste for it. . . . That means you gotta stay humble." Similarly, Jerry

Lewis remarked that a deprived background often typifies the comedian (Wilde, 1973, p. 331): "Because you have to taste dirt before you can analyze it."

In studying the comic we get directly involved in the psychology of various kinds of superiority and inferiority. We quickly learn that although being labeled as inferior is painful, it also provides a peculiar potency. The comic is a central actor in the continuous drama of who is up and who is down. As we see later, he tries at times to be both at once. He wants to be up and down simultaneously. This is a tricky and risky way to live, so he often feels precariously immersed in contradictions. He becomes a master at integrating what seems not to fit together. This is actually a central theme in most humor. The joke is so often the mastery of disparate pieces that do not fit together. The image of the pompous gentleman taking a pratfall is a paradigm in so much humor. On the one hand there is dignity and on the other hand there is the silly sprawling fall. Putting the two together somehow, mysteriously, brews comedy. We will, in this book, explore the link between the incongruities in the comic's personality and his fine alchemy in distilling humor from themes that seem, on the surface, to be alien to each other.

We have taken several approaches in trying to understand the people who are the humor makers. First of all, we recruited numerous professional comedians and clowns who agreed to be interviewed and also to respond to various psychological tests. They were all people whose full-time occupations involved being funny. They varied in their public prominence and success. Among the more prominent comedians and clowns who participated were Harry Ritz, Jimmy Ritz, Sid Caesar, Tommy Smothers, Pat Cooper, Donald O'Connor, Jackie Mason, Jimmie Walker, Kay Ballard, Julie DeJohn, "Professor" Irwin Corey, Myron Cohen, and Blinky the Clown (Ernest Burch). To supplement the information we gathered from such individuals, we also collected all of the autobiographies and biographies of fun makers that we could locate. Numerous comedians like Charlie Chaplin, Milton Berle, Groucho Marx, Harold Lloyd, Mort Sahl, and W. C. Fields have published revealing data about themselves. Furthermore, we decided to study nonprofessional funny people. We wanted to find out if amateur comedians were or were not like the professionals. Is the humorist with a national reputation really different in his personality dynamics from the amateur comedian who is the top wit of local cocktail parties? If we understand the professional comedian, does that give us any insight into what happens when ordinary people create comedy? Among the amateurs we studied were funny college students and schlemiel-like children who played the fool and were often class clowns. The information we pulled together from all these sources was then looked at in the context of what is known about humor. There is a growing scientific literature about joking, laughter, and fun that helped us to think through some tough interpretative problems.

As we got more and more immersed in the fantasies and feelings of the comedian-clown, we were drawn to issues that go beyond humor. We could see that understanding the comedian clarifies other problems having to do with how



we bridge contradictions in our lives; how we make occupational choices to fit our needs; and how we wrestle to overcome the apparent evil within ourselves. To understand the comedian is to come closer to grasping difficult issues that have troubled just about everyone.

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Rhoda L. Fisher

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# 1

# Where and How Do Comedians Surface?

## INTRODUCTION

What is the pathway to dedicating your life to being funny and manufacturing laughter? How do people like Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton or Milton Berle or Martha Raye or Will Rogers or Groucho Marx get launched? Are there typical pathways?

We can provide information about this matter on the basis of two sources. First, as we shall describe in detail later, we interviewed over 40 professional clowns and comedians and learned a good deal about their life patterns. Second, we collected published biographical and autobiographical accounts of 40 comedians and clowns.<sup>1</sup> Putting these two sources together gave us a rather reliable picture of how professional funny people evolve. We would like in this chapter to provide some general, fairly impressionistic information about the beginnings of the comic-to-be<sup>2</sup> and also about some of his special perspectives on life. This

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<sup>1</sup>They are listed in alphabetical order below: Goodman Ace, Fred Allen, Woody Allen, Lucille Ball, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Joey Bishop, Mel Brooks, Joe E. Brown, Lennie Bruce, George Burns, Johnny Carson, Charlie Chaplin, Joan Davis, Phyllis Diller, Jimmy Durante, W. C. Fields, Eddie Foy, Jackie Gleason, Dick Gregory, Bob Hope, George Jessel, Buster Keaton, Emmett Kelly, Ernie Kovacs, Bert Lahr, Stan Laurel, Jerry Lewis, Beatrice Lillie, Harold Lloyd, Groucho Marx, Ed McMahon, Martha Raye, Carl Reiner, Will Rogers, Mort Sahl, Danny Thomas, Flip Wilson, Ed Wynn, Henny Youngman.

<sup>2</sup>It is important to keep in mind that most comics come from families of lower socioeconomic status. A great many grew up in poverty-stricken circumstances. People like Charlie Chaplin, Milton Berle, Jackie Gleason, Flip Wilson, and Joey Bishop were exposed to great economic hardship. Previous studies (Willhelm & Sjöberg, 1958) have shown that comics do, in general, come from lower socioeconomic strata and also from a greater proportion of broken families than do other classes of actors and show people. It remains true, however, that some comics have grown up in homes of relative affluence. Poverty is not a prerequisite for comic talent.

information will provide an overall framework for making sense of more detailed and technical material we present later.

## EARLY SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

One of the first things we discovered is that comics are usually funny quite early in life. A majority recall that as kids they enjoyed saying and doing funny things. They especially recall being funny in school. Again and again they remember being the “class clown.” It is interesting how consistently this class-clown theme appears. The comics would do things in school which involved mocking teachers and getting the kids in class to laugh at the rigidities of the school culture. They cultivated this role with zest and would often devote more time to it than to their studies. They seemed to glory in the laughter of their school mates. Here are a few examples of memories bearing on this point that were conjured up by some of the comics we interviewed:

In school in the fourth grade I’d sit in the back of the room. I’d make paper airplanes. I’d defy the teacher and all the kids laughed.

The teacher would tell me to go to the board and spell “petroleum” and I wrote “oil.” Sometimes the teacher would get exasperated. . . . Sometimes I’d go with a joke too long.

As a kid I always hung onto humor. I was one of the funniest in my school. I was voted funniest in our yearbook.

I had a lot of trouble in school. I was nasty. I had an English teacher who was very ugly. She’d ask the girls, “Can you see through my dress?” I’d imitate a girl, “Yes, I can.” She slapped me.

Tommy Smothers, a well-known stand-up comic, gave us a great deal of material about his attempts to be funny in school. He recalls that when he was late for a class, which was apparently not infrequent, he would stage the most visible entrance into the room as possible. He would make a point of walking directly up to the teacher’s desk and begin a litany of apology for his tardiness. He would loudly and solemnly proclaim how sorry he was and the more annoyed the teacher became the more he would reaffirm his guilt. The class would roar and he got a big kick out of it. He was quite aware of what he was doing and the impact he was making. Similarly, he would often attempt to turn an occasion when he was supposed to address the class into a hilarious performance. It is worthwhile quoting one of his memories:

I would look them straight in the eye. I would not smile or laugh or giggle and say exactly what I had to say. Well, this straightness cracked people up. When I

once gave a nomination speech, in the ninth grade. . . . I memorized a very long speech with every big word I could put in, with this straight mock seriousness and the people fell apart. . . . I got a big kick out of them laughing, but I didn't know what it was that made them laugh, but I knew I could make people laugh. . . . I wrote the speech hoping it might be funny. Because I put, 'It's a great pleasure to be in this edifice with so many of the students gathered together on such a serious occasion.'"

Johnny Carson, who has had occasion to know a wide range of comics, reaffirmed the importance of school experiences in the comic's life (Wilde, 1973, p. 177): 'I think, by the fact that you find you can get laughs when you are in school—and this is where most of the guys start, when they are growing up in the neighborhood—they're jerking around, doing silly things, interrupting the class. It's an attention-getting thing, and that, in effect, is saying, 'Hey, look at me, folks, I'm getting your acceptance'."

The comics' funny behavior in school often conveyed a mocking attitude toward the teacher and this symbolized their generally negative attitude toward the whole school establishment. The great majority clearly hated the kinds of things they were supposed to do in classrooms. It is rare to find a comic who was a good student, despite the fact that as a group they are of high intelligence (Janus, 1975). In fact, a majority got poor grades and tried to miss school whenever possible. There is evidence that the expectations of teachers upset them. Woody Allen found school so upsetting that he fled from it day after day. The young boy, Charlie Chaplin, resorted to stratagems that would do credit to the Little Tramp to evade school classes. Jack Benny was involved in a running battle with his parents in his refusal to do his school work. It is a common pattern for the future comic to play truant and to spend the day not in school, but rather in places of entertainment like the movie house or the vaudeville palace.

Woody Allen, in referring to the escapist things he did to avoid going to school, said (Lax, 1975, p. 30): 'It kept me isolated from the world. It was so much better than school, which was boring, frightening. The whole thing was ugly. I never had the answers. I never did the homework.'"

Bert Lahr is another example of a comic who hated school. His son comments (Lahr, 1969, pp. 21–22): "School was the bane of Lahr's early years. He had never been a good student, but at P.S. 40 in the Bronx, he seemed to get worse. His parents were outraged by his curious inaction. He did not work; he would not even try. 'I was like a caged animal in school', he says. . . . He could not explain to his parents about the classroom—the anxiety over gray walls and long rows of wooden seats, the sadness of the winter stench of damp clothing and moth balls. . . . 'I didn't feel free at school; it just didn't mean anything—nothing'."

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<sup>3</sup>Note the following comment by Groucho Marx's biographer son (Marx, 1954, p. 16):

Despite his fascination with the printed word, father was not a born scholar. In fact, he wasn't any kind of a scholar, if his school record is any indication. He had a disdain for most of his teachers, and



The only pleasant memory Bert Lahr could recall about school related to a school play in which he participated. He had a funny part and he was ecstatic about the impact he had on the audience. His biographer son noted (p. 22): "He felt completely in control on stage, proud and curiously powerful. He had enjoyed it all—the make-up, the clowning, the noisy laughter." His sister recalled that (p. 23), "after that performance . . . he was the clown of the class and they couldn't do anything with him."

There is no question but that something about being in school turns the potential comic off. This is not a universal truth. Occasionally comics have done well in school. But they are the exceptions. The school atmosphere, with its emphasis on discipline, sitting still, and being seriously devoted to abstractions seems to frighten and anger the neophyte comedian. But, interestingly, it is often at school, where he is looking for some way to comfort himself and to assert that he has talent (even if the school does not formally recognize it), that he proves he can make people laugh. The classroom becomes a stage for attracting attention by displaying defiant funniness. Also, school plays and skits often provide the potential comic with a chance, as was true for Bert Lahr, to try his hand formally at amusing and entertaining an audience. For many, it is the first official taste of glory and success. Teachers are typically surprised at the talent revealed by the young comic when they get a chance to see him give his first formal public performance, because their previous experiences with him in the classroom have been so negatively slanted. The potential comic also does a good deal of kidding around at home and in his neighborhood. He says funny things to his parents and he jokes around a lot with big brothers and sisters. Actually, he has a way of getting people to see him as a bit on the laughable or silly side. Quite a few comics recall their surprise and also pain when they discovered that some of the laughter directed at them was depreciating. Jimmy Durante (Fowler, 1951) was very unhappy about the kidding he received about his nose. Joe E. Brown (1956) describes vividly his embarrassment when, as a child, he discovered that adults thought he had a funny-looking face.

One logical question that arises is whether the comic typically models himself after someone in his family. Is he imitating a funny father or mother? Our interview material does not suggest this is the usual case. Only about 15% of the comics we questioned recalled that one of their parents was unusually funny or dedicated to joking. By the way, whenever a parent was described as funny, it

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an unfortunate inability to solve arithmetic problems. These things, coupled with the fact that my grandparents couldn't afford to support him through any more schooling, led to his decision, at the age of fourteen, to retire from P.S. 14 without waiting for his diploma.

It is worthwhile quoting also from Jack Benny's biographer (Fein, 1976, p. 25): "He [Benny] was constantly in trouble with his teachers and parents for skipping school on matinee days. Finally, when he failed every examination, the principal requested him to take his leave."