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A LESSON IN COMEDY

Becoming the next Joan Rivers or Bill Cosby could be as easy as taking a class.

BY NICOLE PRESLEY DESIGN JANAYE CLIFFORD

Teaching students the basics in comedy, professional entertainer Gavin Jerome and Dr. Peter Orazem show students how to get a laugh in an Iowa State honors seminar called Comedy College.

The seminar is offered exclusively in the fall to honors seminar students. Technically, Jerome could only help teach the class since he isn’t a licensed instructor, so Orazem, an economics professor at Iowa State University and Teaching Assistant for Comedy College, accompanied Jerome in every class.

“That was the tricky part,” Jerome says. “When I came in to teach the class I had to teach it with him since I’m not a full licensed instructor.”

Before Iowa State, Jerome taught a class called “Gavin Jerome’s Comedy College,” a private seminar through Adult Education in Des Moines. It eventually made its way to Ames.

“[Jerome] was offering a class called Comedy College through the local Toastmaster’s Club,” Orazem says. “One of the guys at church, Roman Lynch...runs the Midnight Madness Road Race in July every summer for Ames. He said, ‘You know you’re a funny guy, you ought to try this.’ And so that’s how I got into it.”

According to Jerome, the honor society decides what honors seminar classes will help a student succeed in the businessworld, and they decided this class fit the bill. For example, knowing how to communicate effectively, speaking in public and knowing how to make someone laugh are considered important abilities to possess within the job market.

“The honors seminar people had been approaching [Orazem] for quite a long time to teach the class,” Jerome says. “He wasn’t the instructor; he took my [comedy] class a few years back. He said ‘Well I’ll put Gavin in touch with you and see if we can’t get something going.’ He and I talked about it and then I sat down with the powers that be at Iowa State and next thing you know, here we are.”

The class doesn’t have written tests and is a pass-fail course. Jerome focuses on four main skills throughout the semester: joke writing, joke telling, improvement in sense of humor and an understanding of the comedy ‘tricks of the trade’ that have been passed down from previous generations.

Lab work and putting what they learn into practice takes up the bulk of class time. Students learn how to create different types of jokes as well as how to form ideas and use those ideas to make their “bit” or sketch. Using those ideas, students put jokes together and edit them to fit the style of joke they’re trying to tell.

They’re not just random bits of thought. Even the ones who look like they’re doing stream of consciousness have spent a lot of time worrying about how to make it look like stream of consciousness,” Orazem says.

The students have to elicit at least one laugh from the audience in order to pass the class. “If they bomb and don’t get any laughs then I gotta fail ’em, but everybody did a great job. They all got lots of laughs, so they all passed,” Jerome says.

“Showcase was absolutely nerve-racking at first, of course,” says Addie Reis, a former Comedy College student. “After you get on stage and get that first laugh from the crowd, it’s one of the best and unique experiences you could ask for.”

Nine students performed the first night of the Showcase and eight on the second. The current class limit is 17 students.

It may eventually be offered in the spring, in addition to the fall semester. Jerome says the class isn’t offered this spring because they are trying to “get a couple of little details put in line.” The class is in the process of becoming available university-wide to all students. Jerome is also working to obtain the credentials necessary to become a full-time professor.

“I’m so proud of these students,” Jerome says. “It was the first time it was offered. I told them on the first class ’This is going to be really successful or we’re going to go down in a big ball of flames,’ and it was really successful. All 17 students did a fantastic job and we’re looking forward to offering this for a really long time in the future.”