

It's the way I tell 'em. My first attempt at stand-up ... aged 64

Caroline Phillips
had a laugh trying to become a comedian in a week — but did her audience?

I am on stage in front of 65 strangers who think I'm a stand-up comedian. I've never done anything like this before. Why have I agreed to expose myself to cracking jokes solo in public when I'd rather eat my own prostate, if I had one, or face the Covid-19 inquiry naked? I fear stage fright, hecklers and farting near the mike.

Weirdly, I'm actually paying to do this. It's part of the five-day intensive beginner's comedy course at the Bill Murray Comedy Club in London. I'm 64, the age immortalised by the Beatles for being old and losing hair. What sane woman starts doing stand-up at my age? What happened to a gentle retirement into follicle depletion?

It all started with the Hoffman Process, a whizzo personal development course that I did recently and which included acting in an impromptu skit. I laughed my cashmere socks off and realised that performing was on my inner child's bucket list. But to go from absolute beginner to gig in a week? That would be like skydiving with a dodgy parachute. So I sign up.

I want to learn to be confident and funny on stage without my demons hijacking me. (The "you're not funny enough"/"too old"/"not clever enough" monsters.) Performing humorously will also be a useful skill for intragalactic literary tours when my memoir is published (about me and my criminal mum; that's not a joke). Plus my 94-year-old dad's been ill and I've been facing divorce after 28 years, a family feud and hobbling after an accident. Who wouldn't need a laugh? I'd also like a new man — an amusing one.

I arrive on my first morning to a beer-whiffy pub room/classroom. There are 16 of us, mostly twenty to fortysomethings and largely comedy virgins. There are two broadcasters, a tech entrepreneur and someone whose nonagenarian dad always rings up steaks as potatoes at the Tesco self-checkout. Dec Munro — an award-winning director, comedic hero and Cambridge history grad — is our (genius) teacher.

We kick off with two boasts and a lie, to get us acquainted. I reveal that a tornado hit my London home, that I once commandeered the prime minister Gordon Brown's private Range Rover and protection officers

for personal use, and that I stole six raspberry macaroons from Harrods. My peers don't twig that only the last is a porky.

It's soon like being at joke school. But can funniness be taught? We learn the rule of three ("Join the army! See the world, meet people and kill them"), list jokes, the comedy of exaggeration (Monty Python's Four Yorkshiremen sketch) and persona development (the

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nascent comedians see me as confident, privileged and posh, white and senior — an upper-middle-class Jo Brand). Then there's rhythm, tempo, reverse attitude, joke pass, pull back and reveal, and call-backs to master. Confused? Oh, just do the course — it's brilliant. And yes, comedy (although not a sense of humour) can be taught.

We also try practical exercises, from writing collaboratively to stage work, and give each other feedback accolades on Post-its. "You nailed it!" one reads. There are memorable

moments. On day one we each perform on stage with a mike for one minute. On day two it's 90 seconds, after writing a set in just ten minutes. On day three I have an existential blip and turn into a Jelly Baby. I'm not alone. I spend the week squiffy with nerves. I'm witty, but being intentional about comedy is a very different skill.

Studies show that laughter releases endorphins, making senior citizens who receive daily jokes, laughter exercises and funny stories 42 per cent happier than those who don't. We enjoy zillions of laughs during the course. It's 42 per cent life-changing, too, giving me a humorous perspective on my break-up and tools with which to counter stage fright. But it's also one of the hardest, most challenging things I've ever done.

The night before the showcase, I decide my set's not funny, I'm not funny and that strangers aren't going to like me. My act pokes fun at getting old, divorce and foot fetishists, with some of my best lines provided by my classmates. I scribble furiously, adding jokes en route to the show. Then midday on a Sunday — that popular comedic hour — arrives. My peers' acts in the first half are hilarious, a remarkable feat given that about 30 hours previously we were newbies.

As the master of ceremonies hollers

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my name, I skip up to the podium, heart booming and brain pulverising. Public speaking and death are our greatest fears. Dec's supportive words ring in my ears: "Relax, love bugs. This isn't a life-defining moment you'll remember on your deathbed." Then I recall Jerry Seinfeld: "If you have to go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy."

As I stand on stage under the blazing lights, pick up the mike and grin with fear, I sense the expectant crowd. I fluff my first and other lines but save myself — to lots of giggles. They think I did it on purpose. Then I get into it. It's a hoot. I feel a light switching on inside me, giving me stage presence. People who've paid to watch are laughing heartily, including at the right bits. Book now for *Live at the Apollo*.

I interrupt some ludicrous sound effects — my enthusiastic enactment of euthanising oldies — to reveal that I'm a journalist. The audience is tickled. My performance racks up 24 laughs, including two whoopees and three long, belly guffaws (who's counting?). That's a chortle every 125 seconds. I leave the stage knowing that I'm brave, funny and have rizz. And muttering, "Never again." Then I book my next gig. **£395/£295 NHS and students. Unemployment discounts available, angelcomedy.co.uk**