

A reporter goes into a comedy club...

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Comic genius doesn't happen overnight.

Or apparently, in my case, ever.

The legendary New York Improv was reopening in time for its 40th anniversary, and I jumped on the celebration to join the ranks of Improv alumni Steve Martin, Robin Williams and Roseanne Barr.

I snagged a five- to seven-minute shot early on a Saturday night. All I had to do was tell some jokes, get some laughs and wait for the sitcom and movie offers to roll in.

Lesson One: Dating comics is not the same as being funny. I have dated three of them, and it was not a laughing matter.

So I spent a weekend watching tapes of Bill Cosby, Ellen DeGeneres and Lewis Black.

Lesson Two: You can't teach people to be funny.

Several days before my debut, I met with Rich Brooks, the Improv's house comic and new-talent director.

Brooks agreed that the tale of my failed auditions — "American Idol," ESPN's "Dream Job" and the Radio City Rockettes — could make an amusing routine. All I needed to do was sit down and write it.

When I left, I felt confident.

Lesson Three: When people say something is easy, it's never *that* easy.

Brooks' advice lingered in my head: "Be concise. Never let them see you sweat. The best comedy comes from truth. The red light tells you when the time is up."

My father's words, however, started to take over.

"But you're not funny. Your brother is the funny one. You're just not funny."

I panicked.

Twenty-four hours before I'd step onstage, I still had nothing but an outline.

Oddly, procrastination seemed the only reasonable course of action.

I reorganized my DVDs and did the dishes. I stared blankly into my closet trying to figure out what to wear, taking into account that a plunging neckline might take some focus away from what I was saying.

I prayed for that red light.

I turned on my computer, Googled "procrastination" and found www.ishouldbeworking.com.

Suddenly, it clicked.

Everything I had done to avoid writing my routine was humorous.

Or it could be. I mean, at least I thought so.

For the sake of research, I continued delaying my writing by going to sleep.

In the morning, I read the paper and found my boffo opening joke.

"So Britney Spears is engaged. That's a first. If she actually gets married, that'll be a second ... long."

Feel free to laugh. Is this mic on?

WELCOME TO THE CLUB

After an hour of rehearsal, I felt ready. All I had to do was stand up and talk. That's two different tasks, but I'm good at juggling priorities.

I got to the club early — not a good sign for an act about procrastination — and grabbed a seat in the reception area, where the talent waits.

Some of the comics were chatty, talking about their favorite venues and recent gigs, while others stayed more reserved, waiting in doctor's-office silence until their turn.

The emcee announced my name, pleaded for mercy — "This is her first time on stage" — and left me at the suddenly too-tall microphone.

What on earth was I doing?

Why hadn't I written anything?



SHIHO FUKADA

UP AGAINST THE WALL: The moment of truth for our aspiring standup

I smiled, lowered the microphone and starting talking.

I had friends sitting in the back of the room, but total strangers laughed at my Britney Spears line. I relaxed.

I took my first glance at the audience and searched for my friends, who at least would laugh at my presence, even if I wasn't exactly witty.

But the lights were blinding and intimidating, and I could only spot the people in the front row, all of whom, thankfully, were smiling.

The Web site's name got laughs. So did

the idea of sleeping with tapes under my pillow to absorb the essence of standup comedy.

A couple of lines got groans. You won't read them here.

Okay, I didn't "kill," but I wasn't the worst comic up there. I didn't have to refer to notes or shout ethnic insults or the F-word to keep the crowd interested. I was no Lily Tomlin, but people laughed.

Lesson Four: Time is slow and flows out of your control. Just when I was feeling comfortable, the red light flashed. E-mail: bheldman@edit.nydailynews.com



STORMY LEATHER: Marlon Brando played Johnny in "The Wild One."

CRITIC AT LARGE

Farewell to a rebel, with applause

Good as Marlon Brando was in "Streetcar" or "Godfather" or "Waterfront," the movie his death sent me back to watch last weekend was "The Wild One."

That's where Brando, like James Dean and Elvis, scared the white bucks off 1950s America by putting on black leather, and that's cool enough.

But mostly I like it because it's one of the movies' great love stories.

Brando plays a motorcycle-riding drifter named Johnny whose biker pals throw a small town into chaos, and many viewers define the film by the scene where a townie asks Johnny what he's rebelling against.

"Whaddya ya got?" he replies.

It's a screenwriter's dream line that suggests Johnny — and maybe a lot of real-life Johnnies — harbor a cold, amoral antagonism toward everything.

I understand why that's scary.

But that's not the real message here. "The

Wild One" is a great rebellion movie because like all of America's best rebellions, from the Revolutionary War to rock 'n' roll, it isn't just about attacking something that needs repair. It's about creating something better.

In his own microcosmic way, that's what

Brando's Johnny is doing in "The Wild One" when he falls for Kathie, a small-town waitress splendidly played by Mary Murphy.

It's a romance in which, on the surface, nothing happens. It's all false starts, awkward gestures and frustrating inarticulation. He talks in jive. She keeps running out of words and saying, "It's crazy."

Yet, thanks to Brando and Murphy, we know exactly what they mean. Johnny became a motorcycle drifter to get away from the kind of bullies and hypocrites he finds again in this little town. But he doesn't

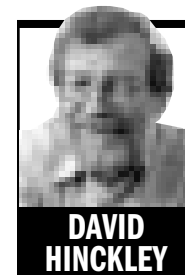
want to go nowhere forever, and in Kathie he sees a somewhere.

Kathie, conversely, has done exactly what small-town postwar America told her to do. She obeyed all the rules, she's a good girl, and her reward is that now, right in the middle of a Norman Rockwell painting, she's suffocating. She's got as much cause to rebel as Johnny, maybe more. She just hasn't done it. Yet.

The ending of "The Wild One" doesn't tell us what happens with Johnny and Kathie. It's ambivalent, forcing us to project, and I confess I've spent years trying to construct a scenario that gets them together.

Some days I convince myself. Some days I don't. I do know that on the worst days, Brando and Murphy still remind us that the rebels who matter are the rebels with a cause.

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