

MAKE 'EM LAUGH

HAVE YOU HEARD THE ONE ABOUT THE COMEDIAN WHO GOES INTO CLASSROOMS TO GET YOUNG PEOPLE INTERESTED IN WRITING? DAVE SMITH TELLS ALL...

They say the two most common things that people fear in life are public speaking and death. As a stand-up comedian – if you get it wrong – you can bag both in one evening. Oh yes, a brace of one's worst nightmares all done and dusted in one fell swoop. They call it dying on stage for a reason; because that's how it feels.

Every comedian has had a handful of gigs, usually early on in his or her careers, when nothing works. *Nothing*. All you can hear is the



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



In the past seven years Dave has visited over 500 schools, sharing his experiences as a stand-up comedian and writer in his lively and interactive workshops. After twenty years on stage and at the keyboard, he is now inspiring pupils to write and express themselves, helping them overcome the 'fear of the blank page'. Dave can be contacted at wordsmith-features.com

sound of your own tongue click-clacking away in your dry mouth, followed shortly afterwards by the forlorn thud of your own footsteps walking off the stage. It's very hard not to take it personally. Then follows the long drive home, sighing, and thinking about becoming a postman instead. I know – I've done it.

There are strong similarities between teachers and comedians. We're all trying to engage or, 'go over' as they say in America. As a comedian, you are relying on the audience to make up their minds fairly quickly that they like you, and then listen to

and go along with the ideas you're sharing.

Once that's established, everyone has a better time. The comedian relaxes, the audience feel they're in safe hands, everyone laughs, no one gets hurt.

Similarly, although teachers aren't necessarily playing it for laughs, if pupils decide right from the start that they don't 'buy' you, then imparting information to them in a way that will stick is always going to be something of an uphill

struggle. I'm sure all educators have days when a hitherto bullet-proof lesson they know usually hits the mark just doesn't 'work,' leading to a soul-searching evening of trying to work out why. Well, sometimes it's you, and sometimes it's just... them.

Having played midnight shows at the Comedy Store in front of rowdy crowds, awash with 'tired and emotional' individuals, stag nights, and an entire front row with chins on chests, sleeping off the evening's excesses, one might think that entertaining students in a secondary school – as I do with my creative writing workshops – would be a walk in the park. But trying to be funny at 8.45am in front of two hundred lairy year 10s, some still sporting pillow scars across their faces, others visibly oscillating from the effects of a just-chugged can of energy drink, brings its own, unique set of challenges. I take my hat off to teachers having to maintain that level of energy and commitment all day, every day. Comedians do twenty minutes, then home.

Does this masochistic streak – this urge to risk it all in front of an audience – run through the DNA of other folk who put themselves in the line of fire professionally? Are politicians fuelled by the need to hear the sound of their own voices? Probably. The clergy? Who knows? Though a priest once told me that after a really good sermon – where he felt he had genuinely 'connected' with the people and moved them in some way – he would retire serenely to his private room before indulging in a private, 'Yesss!' complete with Andy Murray fist-pumping. I like that. Storming it is storming it, whomever you've been speaking to.

Whether it's a comic in a room above a pub explaining the 'hilarious' differences between cats and dogs, a vicar offering words of comfort to a troubled congregation, or a teacher making sense about Curly's role in *Of Mice and Men*, that feeling of connection and of having made a difference is the same. Or if not the same, very closely related.

The difference with comedians, though, is that it's nearly all weighted toward ego; 'Look at me, look at me, look at me!' If only my Mum and Dad had just gone ahead and bought me that puppy, perhaps all this could have been avoided...

