

Stand-Up & Deliver!

Chris Head is a stand-up comedy coach and director whose knowledge of live performance techniques, joke structures and storytelling is helping ad agencies to pitch ideas to clients, as well as giving them a taste of the stage

By Mark Sinclair. Illustration by Michael Parkin

Having brought his stand-up course into 180 Kingsday, Lida and The Mill, Chris Head is an advocate for the fact that many of the skills needed to perform comedy on stage can translate into other creative spheres. Head has been working as a mentor to comedians since the mid-1990s and started to take his expertise into the corporate world a few years ago – to a bank, a law firm and now, increasingly, into ad agencies.

"I've had a lot of people from advertising agencies do my stand-up class, which I do on Monday nights above a pub in Soho," he says of how he was first prompted to consider the link between comedy and agency practice. "I asked them why they were doing it – and the first thing that anyone gets out of it is you become absolutely bullet-proof at public speaking. Once you've stood in a comedy club context with that looming knowledge that you have to be funny, and you have to be consistently clear, engaging and likeable, then suddenly anything else is a walk in the park."

What Head also realised through his coaching of budding adland stand-ups was that people were applying what they had been learning to how they delivered pitches to clients. He was then approached by the Lida agency to come in and lead a stand-up course and organise a final show for their colleagues – "a pressure audience," Head says. "I've done it for four or five years now. It's become part of their culture that they have an annual stand-up course."

While this is unusual, perhaps it's no surprise that creative companies have a connection with stand-up. "There is a meeting of minds when I go into a creative agency, we're speaking the same language," says Head. "Essentially, comedy is communicating messages, ideas, opinions and thoughts in an appealing way that the audience can understand and buy into. And I think that's really the same things as anyone who's involved in advertising is doing, too." In fact, Head has just returned from teaching his course at 180 in Amsterdam where the brief

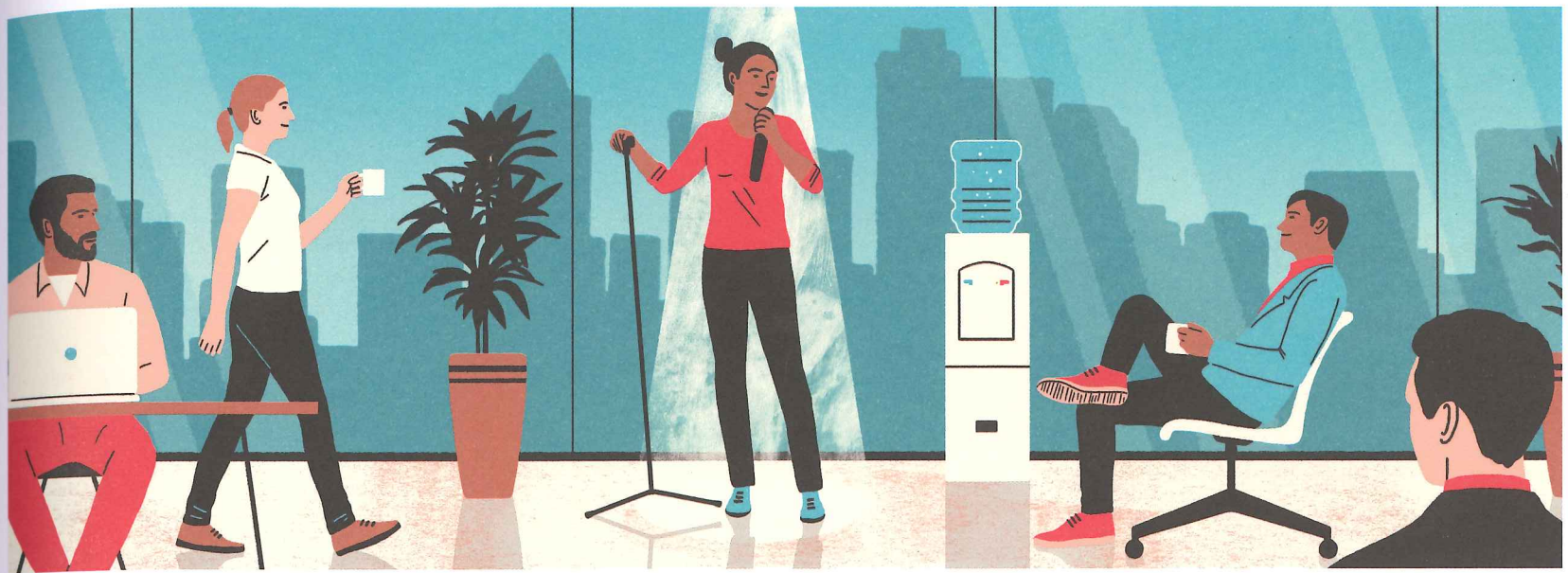
for him was more specific. "I'm often quite surprised and pleased by the angle they take, so they've clearly got stuff to pitch, but sometimes how people are trying to explain these ideas is not doing it justice," he says. "And, in comedy, you could have the best material in the world, but if you deliver it badly it's not going to work."

So how does Head's course take shape? Well, in advance of the first session he emails each of the participants a series of links to hundreds of jokes. He asks each person to pick three and learn them so they can be performed on day one. "It has to be a one-liner attributed to a specific comedian, not like a 'joke book' joke," says Head. "What I want is for them to pick jokes that are constructed to be 'said' and are to be pinned to a particular personality, not ones you'd read and smile at in the office." People can personalise the jokes but must present them either as a series of disconnected gags, or as a narrative. And they're not allowed to read their material out.

"One that comes up the most is

an Emo Philips joke: 'I like to play chess with old men in the park, but the tough part is finding 32 of them'," Head recalls. "Which is lovely. Interestingly, people don't always get it and I think that's [because Philips'] 'persona' is such a big part of it. The fact that he's this oddball, you're already in the mindset of him doing odd things and approaching problems from a strange place." Nevertheless, each participant on the course will bring something of their own to the joke – and, often, less is more. "We see how the people who held it lightly are really effective," Head says. "The people who come up [and] look like they're really needy for the audience to laugh, they don't do so well. The audience always do want you to do well, because unlike when someone sings badly and it's extremely entertaining, when someone does comedy badly, it's excruciating."

Head's comedy course then involves looking at several aspects of establishing an act: finding one's comedy persona and at what level of 'status' that persona will operate;



learning about the delivery of the 'set-up' and 'payoff' mechanisms, not to mention the element of surprise and misdirection; and the importance of preparation and rehearsal. "When we explore status I look at three status levels," Head says. "There's the 'high status' and the 'low status' and in the middle there's the 'audience's mate'. Usually, a 'high status' act must have elements of self-deprecation or humility, or they'll seem arrogant; while a 'low status' persona must avoid being too needy, but make something of "trying to do something but not having the skills to do it," says Head. "If you can embrace that side of yourself, that's the beginnings of a naturally funny persona." And if someone is open about their weaknesses and experiences "in the end [that] is a strangely powerful thing, acknowledging the truth of what people can see anyway."

Then there's the concept of the 'set-up / payoff', which Head says is the simple structure inherent to most comedy and one that can successfully be applied to a pitching scenario.

"All comedy is that, really," he says. "The person walking down the street and not noticing the banana skin is the set-up. Notice we the audience see the banana skin, but the person doesn't – so that's dramatic irony. Then the payoff is him slipping. The work that the set-up does is really important." A key thing to remember, he adds, is that the "slip has to be really sudden" – and in verbal comedy, the joke should follow the same pattern. Head cites a classic by Jack Dee: "I hate people who think it's clever to take drugs. Like customs officers." Its power lies in the way it flips straight after the set-up. "So look at what it is you have to pitch or present, any kind of speaking, and [ask], 'Well, what are the pay-offs?' And you construct it around that."

"The other thing about comedy is that there has to be some surprise in it," he adds. But in the context of a pitch, a client expects to be surprised by new work – so what then? "One way you maximise your surprise is through misdirection," Head says. "The Jack Dee joke is misdirection.

You can use [it] in a pitch so that [the client] anticipates the conventional answer or the thing they've seen before, so that then when you hit them with it – and you've misdirected them – it's more surprising and has much more impact."

Think of an ordinary pitch, Head supposes, that might start like this: "We've seen these kinds of campaigns a lot and there's a very familiar way of addressing this, or a way that this brand would talk about itself. So we've decided to turn that on its head and surprise the audience and just come at it from a really different perspective!" But that's telegraphing where it's going. When you go, "We're doing *this*!" they might be pleased with how you've executed it, but they won't be surprised.

Whereas if you say – "The classic way to talk about these brands is in this tone of voice and in this colour and imagery. It's a classic, it's worked for 20 years – if it ain't broke don't fix it. Well, we've decided to do *this* instead!" – it's exactly the same idea you're presenting, but because

they've been misdirected it has so much more impact. You've gone set-up, payoff, misdirection."

Despite the contextual differences the crossovers between selling a joke on stage and selling a campaign to a client are obvious. And it isn't about getting laughs, rather understanding the relationship between performer/audience, agency/client. "What doesn't occur to people and what didn't occur to me initially is that you can use these techniques when your intention is not at all to be funny," Head says. It's about "getting that structure and the rhythm, getting the most out of your surprises, knowing what the pay-offs are, basically so you can land an idea. I'm reminding them how to land an idea." ■

Chris Head's book, A Director's Guide to the Art of Stand-Up, is published by Methuen Drama/Bloomsbury on July 12 and can be pre-ordered from bloomsbury.com. He has also devised a new BA Comedy course at Bath Spa University, which launches this year. See chrishead.com