

A Real Standup Guy: Comedian Derek Edwards enjoys being funny in front of good crowds

Excerpt from The Ottawa Citizen Monday, December 5, 2005

By: Peter Simpson

Source: The Ottawa Citizen

Plenty of people in this country love to paint Ottawa as a grey and humourless place. Don't count Derek Edwards among them.

"Ottawa brings out a great crowd," Edwards says during a recent phone interview. "In any town where so many big decisions are made, there's always a great counterculture. People are sick and tired of these decision-makers that they're surrounded by, and they love to hear people come into town and make fun of them. It's a really solid, funky, self-aware counterculture."

Not that Edwards seems the type to spend a lot of time analysing why this gets a laugh and that doesn't ("Lean toward the funny stuff," he says when asked for advice to amateur standups). He simply enjoys being funny in front of good crowds. He'll stand before his biggest Ottawa gig yet, as a solo performer, at Centrepointe Theatre on Wednesday.

He's been through town at the comedy clubs and with the Just for Laughs tour, but he's still relatively new at the solo show thing.

He says, paradoxically, that one of the secrets of lasting 90 minutes alone on a stage is to not make people laugh too much.

"You can hammer along like a speed bag if you're doing 10 minutes anywhere -- just bang, bang, bang. But people get a little tired, or they just need a change of pace. It's like going to see a comedy movie: You're not laughing all the way through. You're changing paces, you kind of duck and weave a little bit more. You're not always throwing the punch."

He pauses, then lets out a deep laugh. "Geez, that wasn't a bad analogy. I'm just horsing around at the cabin here. That sounded pretty good."

The cabin, which Edwards and his wife bought last Canada Day, is somewhere northeast of Kingston.

"There's no real town around. The thing I'm closest to is called Plevna. Have you even heard of that? It's just on the outskirts of Oompa, if that helps at all." He says it's beautiful country, and they're right on a lake. "There's a little place where people can swim. Hey, it doesn't get any better than that."

Except when the power goes out. When a tour promoter lined up an afternoon of interviews and the power went out at the last minute, Edwards switched to Plan B. That would be a pay phone on the side of the highway.

"It wasn't even a Superman kind of phone booth, it was just a phone. You're out in the wind and the dust, there are trucks going by, and I can't hear these people. I spent four hours by the side of the road watching the horses."

There's a very Canadian amiability about Edwards, who comes from Timmins and has travelled to every bit of the country. He has that obvious love for the place tinged with a sharp awareness of its regional characteristics, and tensions. He's also aware that not all audiences are the same.

"The best and the funniest audiences are in Newfoundland, and they kind of get less funny as you go west," he says, then laughs.

Edwards laughs a lot -- at his own jokes, at other people's jokes, at life. He can wring laughs from the most pedestrian thing -- watching a video with his new wife, and realizing that marriage changes even how a man must watch a video -- or being the second-most famous person from Timmins, after Shania. ("Nobody remembers Duncan of Nazareth.") Most people are happy to laugh with Edwards.

Although there was that time in Red Deer.

"The bike gang out there is called the Grim Reapers, and we played a place that (the bikers) ... found it a bit scummy, kind of rough, you know. So some idiot out there figures, 'perfect place for comedy.'

"I'm in this place on the stage, and I have one of those poles for strippers. Oh my God, I've never spent a longer time trying to entertain people. It's bad enough that you're not from there, but when they announce, 'Now living in Toronto,' hey, you might as well put a swastika on my chest at that point.

"At one point I thought I must have been up there for an hour -- it turned out to be 14 minutes -- and this guy is doing this thing with his hands and I'm thinking he's telling me to get off the stage, but he's doing this thing like streeetchhh, you know, like he's doing this pulling toffee apart with his two hands. I can't tell you the deflated feeling I felt when I realized what he was trying to imply."

Theatres, most of which do not have a stripper's pole on stage, are better places for a comic, says Edwards, who won the best standup award at the Canadian Comedy Awards this year.

"The dynamics in theatre are somewhat more friendly. People are more comfortable and they've paid a door price and invested some interest in seeing you, so they listen more attentively. You're getting a lot of energy feedback from the crowd, and it helps elevate your stuff along the way."

And the truth of it is, he doesn't do much political stuff. This is Canada, he says, why would he?

"You can't bend people's ears too much about politics because the fact is, in Canada they don't really care." (He doesn't sound at all bothered by this observation.) "There's so little difference between the parties. Say you look at four different weasels from all different families in nature, you can hardly tell them apart. So why should I hack on this guy -- they're all the same."

Being a good, civic-minded Canadian, he knows just what it'll take to make politics funny: "There's gotta be a fistfight somewhere along the line."

Like the time Jean Chretien throttled a protester, for example.

"That's how he established himself among the Liberals out west: He just dropped a couple of guys. Apparently he's like this dangerous guy. His respect skyrocketed out west."

Derek Edwards plays Centrepointe Theatre on Wednesday.