

DIRECTORS ON DIRECTING COMEDY

"I've found that the line between comedy and drama when you're directing is very, very thin. Sometimes, it's so thin that you can't even recognize it. W.C. Fields said that all great comedy is rooted in cruelty and pain, and that's how I try to conduct my own work.

Joe Dante

"It's my job as director of a comedy to set up the joke. I'm a Jew. If I hear an anti-Semitic joke from a stranger, I'm offended and outraged. If a close friend or relative tells me the same joke, I'm laughing. The joke hasn't changed, just my perception of how the joke is being presented. That's how directing comedy works. If I set it up properly, it works.

John Landis

"My theory of comedy filmmaking is that you have to start out with fleshed-out characters and real conflicts who have real things at stake. Because the more rooted the characters, the deeper you laugh.

"In my movies, just when the scene is starting to get really poignant, just before people start rolling their eyes, I hit them with a joke. If the audience trusts the filmmaker, they're willing to let go and allow him to push them emotionally farther."

Frank Coraci

In drama, you tell the story from the inside out; in comedy, it's from the outside in.

Asaad Kelada

"I definitely find that comedy requires an entirely unique set of muscles to direct well. For one thing, it has to be incredibly precise — more precise than drama, I believe. I always say that you can't teach timing. But you sure as heck can discuss it. A large part of comedy directing is discussing and agreeing amongst the cast on what timing is.

Gerry Cohen

"I find while directing comedy that the comedy I respond to has all the challenges of drama, yet with so much more it has to achieve. Comedy is 10 times harder than drama to get right. It's incredibly hard to do it well.

"Garry Shandling's real brilliance on Larry Sanders is that he constructed a drama where the things people said happened to be funny. He figured out the essence of comedy, which is to take the truth and mine it for humor without selling it out for the laugh.

Todd Holland

But the trick in directing comedy is to lead but at the same time be open and flexible."

Reginald Hudlin

"My most important rule in directing comedy is making sure you can see the people's eyes. Both eyes. When they deliver a joke, you want to see their face. And you have to see the eyes of the setup person too. It's a cardinal rule of *Sex and the City* that they have to have a shot that opens right on a face. So much of comedy is in the eyes and what's underneath what they're saying.

....Oh, and we've learned that a moving camera and a joke aren't necessarily good friends. It tends to get in the way of the straight line between setup and punch line."

Michael Patrick King

"Making a comedy that's 27 seconds long is much harder than it looks. What we do is start with a simple idea and build comedy onto it. We did a Citibank spot where a guy keeps his teenage son up all night so he won't do well on the SAT test — so he won't have to pay for college. It's a simple, twisted idea.

Craig Gillespie (commercials)

"What I'm always telling myself as a commercial director working with comedy is to really condense. And you can't shortchange texture. Just because it's only a

30-second commercial doesn't mean your lead character has no job or a wall with no pictures on it. Depth of character is important. It can't just be someone firing through the line to get to the punch line or people won't stick around to hear it. All of the elements have to be thought out, from the clothes to the carpet color to the pen in the shirt pocket. And always, the first four to five seconds are crucial for hooking the viewer."

Bryan Buckley (commercials)

"I'm basically trying to tell a funny story in 25 seconds that people can watch repeatedly and still get something from on 10th or 15th viewing. As absurd as this sounds, you have to build in layers so people won't get tired of watching. I put in sight gags and things people won't find until the fifth time they see a spot. "The beautiful thing about comedy is that a commercial might be funny the first time people see it. But if it's a good enough joke, the anticipation and repetition are funny too. The first time you hopefully laugh at it, the second time with it.

Baker Smith (commercials)