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The Church of Comedy

The director of *Wedding Crashers* and *The Change-Up* learned The Ten Commandments of Directing Comedy through trial and error—not divine inspiration.

By David Dobkin

I'm not funny.

Never have been and, as far as I can tell, I never will be.

For a guy who's made a living for the past 20 years in comedy, that's an odd thing to admit. I was a dead serious little boy. I was never the class clown. I was not born with the gift of comedy like Judd or Todd or many of my peers whom I revere. That said, I have always had a propensity for irreverence, to speak what's on my mind without a clear sense of what's appropriate.

In truth it's more like Tourette's than comedy.

Like a million other kids, I found God when I saw *Star Wars* at 8 years old and decided I was going to disappear from my melancholy suburban life and live as a devout cleric in the great monastic discipline of making movies. When I came to Hollywood I thought I was going to make films like *Taxi Driver* and *Dog Day Afternoon*.



LAST LAUGH: Dobkin isn't a funny guy himself, but knows what makes an audience laugh.

Jump forward many years, and eventually the first door that opened for me was, very much by coincidence, in comedy ... and when God opens a door for you in this monastery, you don't renunciate. You run through with a smile on your face.

I had no training in comedy. And as far as I knew, I had no sense of it. So I learned comedy on the job. These commandments were not handed to me on a mountaintop. There was no burning bush, no goat to sacrifice. I received them the hard way—through a boatload of failure, and more failure, and then more ... and eventually, through success.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF DIRECTING COMEDY

1. "KINDA FUNNY" MEANS IT'S NOT WORKING

Laughter is binary: It either happens or it doesn't. As each joke arrives in the course of a film, the cavernous space of the theater is either filled with joy and laughter, or with the quiet of cringing embarrassment. Every time you step to the plate to make a joke you're going to experience one or the other. "Kinda funny," or in other words, chuckles and smiles, are basically comedy blue balls: a failure to launch. People pay to laugh, and laugh big.

2. IT ONLY LOOKS EASY WHEN IT WORKS

Comedy, when it works, is light on its feet and has the illusion of complete spontaneity: as if there is no film, no camera. You are standing there experiencing it all in real-time. This illusion, I believe, is why so many people think comedy is easy. ("That actor is so funny!!!") People tend to disregard comedy as "art," and somehow downgrade it into a sub-genre of filmmaking referred to as "entertainment."

3. IF IT'S NOT FUNNY, YOU HAVEN'T GONE FAR ENOUGH

When you make a joke, and it doesn't land, what happened? In the kind of comedy I

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practice, which is irreverent comedy, if a joke isn't getting the laugh, you have not stretched the joke far enough. You need to surprise people with just how far you'll go. It's funny when the guys from *The Hangover* wake up completely wrecked from their first night of partying. It's very funny when a chicken walks by and we see the hotel room totaled. But it's fall out of your seat hilarious when we discover a tiger in the bathroom.

4. IF IT'S NOT FUNNY, YOU'VE GONE TOO FAR

Now, there's also the place where you've gone too far and you lose your audience. You mostly do not see these moments, because they are on the editing room floor. Admittedly, they are some of my favorites. In *Kingpin*, Woody Harrelson performs a sexual favor on his super gross landlady because he can't pay the rent. I couldn't stop laughing. The other half of the audience were covering their eyes, and was very much not laughing. For some directors (and studios), this is too far. For me, if you do this right, the half that are covering their eyes are hopefully still having fun with it, because it's fun when the roller coaster goes a bit too fast (as long as you're not tossing your cookies).

5. GREAT COMEDY HAS GREAT DRAMA AT ITS CORE

The more invested the audience is in your characters and the drama of what they are going through, the more they will laugh at the comedy. This is obvious in films like *As Good as It Gets* and *Tootsie*, where we cry as well as laugh. But even in more contemporary work, this commandment applies. In *Knocked Up*, we all really want to know how the hell this schlubby guy and hot girl, who don't even know each other, are going to have a baby together. And because we're invested, when the guy's father gives him advice that is so shockingly honest and hurtful that it only makes things worse, it is crazy funny. Because life is like that for us, too.

6. COMEDY IS HARDER THAN DRAMA (OR SO SAY US WHO DO IT)

This is simple. When you are making a movie, oftentimes there may be tension, and even fighting, on set. This is due to many factors: the pressure of time and money, creative disagreements, a clash of personalities ... whatever. It's called "making movies." When one is making a drama, you can't tell in the dailies, or final film, that everyone wanted to kill each other. The performances are intense and alive and crackling with emotion. With comedy, if the set is not free and fun and flowing, if the talent feels tight and shut down, what you get are constricted performances. And constricted performances are not funny. That illusion of "easy" we spoke about earlier does not happen. So, yes, it's harder.

7. YOU ARE ONLY AS FUNNY AS YOUR CAST

No, people who do not have funny in them are not funny when they read funny lines. Sorry. Just doesn't work that way. Seriously, this is the biggest rule of all. You live and die with your casting decisions. Your actors are the heart and soul of the whole thing. Without brilliant actors, you will not have a brilliant film. Great talent makes the magic come alive.

8. YOU ARE ONLY AS FUNNY AS YOUR SCRIPT

No, the actors don't just walk onto the stage and make up jokes. Get real. You need a good story with well-drawn characters and solid comedy throughout, just as a start. Without a good script that works at least most of the way, you can't make movies that work, either.

9. IF YOU'RE LAUGHING ON SET, BE WORRIED

I don't know why this is true, but I can attest to the fact that I have laughed my ass off on set during certain scenes, and later found they were not nearly as funny in the edit as they were on set. So, don't take laughter on the set as a sign of anything. In fact, it can be distracting from what you may need to really make the scene work.

10. YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE UNTIL YOU ARE DONE EDITING

When you get to the edit and watch your assembly, you will want to cry. Almost nothing works. That's because it's not a movie yet. It's an assembly. And the process you go through between that moment and a finished film is where you find out what you really have: the magic you've captured, and the magic you've missed.

11. YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE UNTIL YOU PUT IT IN FRONT OF AN AUDIENCE

You didn't make the movie for yourself, and you will not know what you have until you show it to an unbiased audience. Unbiased means people who don't know you at all. Too many times people show their friends and think they know what they have, only to get it in front of a real audience and have it destroyed. They laugh, or they don't. They like it, or they don't. This is how you find that out. And it's brutal.

I know, I know, there are more than 10, but those are the commandments, more or less. And all I had to sacrifice to learn them was my self-esteem, my sanity, my body, my relationships, my family, my childhood, and my manhood. You're getting them for free.

But when the lights go out in the theater, and those first jokes start dropping those opening lines of this comedy sermon, and the seats begin to rock hard with laughter that's louder than bombs ... I smile to myself, knowing all the fun that's heading our way over the next 90 minutes. At that moment, it all seems a small price to pay.

Hallelujah.

Amen.



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