

And now for something completely different:



Comedian climbs the standup ladder



Ben Iscoe, a standup comedian, uses his Judaism as a platform for comedy.

By RITA POLIAKOV
Staff Reporter

Ben Iscoe wasn't supposed to be a comedian.

"I applied to six universities [after high school]," said Iscoe, a newcomer to Toronto's comedy scene. "Five for business, one for the arts."

When Iscoe sent in his application to Ryerson University's radio and television arts program, he was just doing it to keep his options open. But then he got in. And he couldn't say no.

"It was just passion over security," Iscoe, 28, said.

At Ryerson, Iscoe focused on writing, specifically comedies.

"I liked [Ryerson]. It was an environment where you got out of it what you wanted to," he said.

"I just love telling stories. I grew up watching TV, I loved it. I think TV is a wondrous medium. People plan their lives around you telling a story."

After graduating in 2005, Iscoe started freelance writing and worked as an assistant director at the Nightingale Company, an independent production company in Toronto.

But he wasn't getting enough work as a freelancer, and assistant director wasn't quite where he wanted to be, so, in January 2009, Iscoe decided to try standup.

"I view it as a way to get my comedy to an audience," Iscoe said. "It's something I've wanted to do since high school."

With the help of a friend, he got a set at Yuk Yuk's Tuesday launch pad, specifically for new comedians.

"Most new comics start there because, quite frankly, it's the only place they know," he said.

"Very quickly I realized how large and intimate the comedy community was."

While his first set went well, Iscoe will never forget his third set. Mostly because he bombed.

"The microphone was set up in the back... It was painful, and, bit by bit, I learned that bombing is inevitable," he said.

"Jokes take such a long time to get to being good. Good jokes are jokes that are there, they're polished, solid, you have them in your pocket."

Iscoe's jokes are from everyday life, which include his experience answering awkward questions at a blood bank.

"For those of us who have given blood, you will know that I'm not paraphrasing. Question 14: have you, in your past or present profession, taken care of or handled monkeys' bodily fluids," he said during a recent set. "I am dying to meet the person that checks off yes."

During his sets, Iscoe also talks about Judaism, and his desire to have greeting cards specifically for Jewish holidays, one of which could read: "On this special day, you should savour this meal. I'll pick up the tab, I got a good deal."

"I see [Judaism] as a platform for humour. There's funny things one can play off of. I think I play off myself. Judaism is an extension of myself," he said.

Iscoe's jokes usually come from random, funny thoughts rather than a lengthy process.

"There's no protocol to come up with funny... I don't think there's a rule to comedy... you make someone think about something in a different way" he said, adding that jokes do need some structure.

"I would argue that standup is like an essay. You

have a premise, you introduce it, then you have observations as evidence. That's my style of comedy."

One of the most important things for a comedian, according to Iscoe, is getting stage time.

"I'm at the first step at a pretty long ladder. [Toronto comedians] are very diverse. The only thing we have in common is we want stage time," he said, explaining that good jokes evolve with practice.

"When I started off, it was difficult, now not so much. If you want stage time, you can get it... there's so many rooms in Toronto... There's rooms only comics know about... On any given week, there's two dozen open mikes."

So far, Iscoe has co-produced a *Colours of Comedy* show, which features multicultural performers, with fellow comedian Alex Kofjman, and has entered competitions such as the Toronto Comedy Brawl, in which he advanced to the quarter finals, and Yuk Yuk's Great Canadian Laugh Off.

"I remember the night I performed [at the Laugh Off.] I was surrounded by full-time, professional comics. I think I held my own."

While Iscoe didn't win, he saw the competition as a good way to get noticed.

"Competitions will have a larger audience, you'll have a larger crowd," he said.

Iscoe plans to continue standup, but he's also studying to take his LSATs.

"I wanted to do something Jews haven't had a chance to shine in," he joked. "I'm just looking for stability... my eggs are not in one basket."

Still, Iscoe enjoys performing, he said, adding that he remembers the first time he got a spontaneous round of applause while telling his blood-bank joke at Yuk Yuk's.

"It was such a high," he said.