

Comedian Rising

Stand-up comedy is no laughing matter to Sy Schimberg. A Sarasota, Florida native and Macalester College freshman, Sy will perform at an open mic at the House of Comedy tonight. He signed up to perform in January, and learned he made it off the waiting list just last Thursday. There will be a slightly larger audience than he is used to - around sixty people will attend. Two hours before the performance, Sy prepares in his dorm room. Photos of family and friends, a crumpled restaurant menu, and a license plate frame that reads “Honk if you love Caesar salad” adorn the dorm’s white cinderblock walls.

“I really love Caesar salad,” he admits.

Comics like Sy get their start performing at open mics multiple nights a week: at best hoping to be noticed by a comedy booker, but at least hoping to get a few laughs.

“Almost every stand-up comedian has made it because they tough out the system,” he says.

“You have to be ready to perform in a barn to a cow.”

He is right. Comics face a steep uphill battle to success. Out of the handful of household names that the stand-up comedy world has produced, thousands more never see their dream realized.

Amateur comics are lucky to even have opportunities to perform to an audience, let alone receive compensation for them. And only the truly gifted can make a career out of telling jokes on stage. None of this deters Sy Schimberg.

One hour until the performance: Sy dons his signature rainbow-striped hoodie, cuffed jeans and

brown boots. He sits in the back seat of a 2014 Volkswagen Jetta (a Lyft ride) and opens up his laptop. He puts in one earbud – the other is mangled and unusable – and listens to Elton John hits. A brief paragraph within a 30-page Word document is his set for the night. I peer over his shoulder and glimpse an opening line: “Well, if you can’t tell by now, I’m Jewish.”

The blue light of the computer screen projects onto Sy’s face as he mumbles lines under his breath. The car’s movement over potholes jostles his laptop, but his eyes remain glued to the words on the screen.

Sy traces his interest in comedy back to the seventh grade, where humor was his survival mechanism in the rat race of middle school. But he realized that he wanted to pursue comedy professionally the very first time he told a joke on stage, during a tenth grade talent show. Taking the high school auditorium stage, he felt the immense pressure of the moment. At that point in his life, Sy brimmed with joke ideas and was constantly jotting them down in notebooks, but had never worked up the courage to perform them until now. And in that moment, he went blank. He just stared at the audience, and the audience stared back. He blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“Do you guys ever think about where strawberry milk comes from?” he asked.

For a moment, there was silence. Then, a child in the very front row burst out laughing. The rest of the audience soon followed suit. He grinned, letting the feeling of cracking up an entire audience wash over him. He still does not know why a comment so senseless and silly provoked this reaction. Regardless, in that moment, he knew that he needed to perform again.

His stand-up comedy journey brought him from that high school auditorium all the way to the House of Comedy tonight, where he is tenth in a lineup of twelve amateur comedians. He is the youngest performer tonight by far, and at five feet and four inches, his head only reaches most of the other comics' shoulders. He leaves his table in the back of the venue, and a modest stage illuminated by soft yellow light awaits him.

“Well if you can't tell by now, I'm Jewish,” he opens. The line takes a moment to sink in for the audience, and a brief strained silence ensues. But the laughter comes. He jumps into a monologue about a bar mitzvahs, delivering a winning anecdote about a middle school friend.

“When I was in middle school a friend came up and asked me, ‘a bar mitzvah, isn't that a ceremony in Judaism where you honor Jewish boys growing their penises?’” he says, curtailling a grin while the audience chuckles.

“So I don't know what he thinks a bat mitzvah is,” He pauses. “For girls,” he adds, “but I really hope he thinks it's the same thing.” The audience's laughter swells into an uproar.

Despite the audience's affirmation, Sy is still working up to the confidence of a professional stand-up comedian.

“Like I said, I'm originally from Florida, where the average age in - ” he says, then stutters for a moment. “The average age in the clubs I perform in is, on a good day, 110.” He pauses for a moment, and this time the pause's effect is more awkward than comedic. “There, the phrase ‘I'm

dying of laughter' has a much more literal meaning." His joke is greeted with just a smattering of chuckles.

"I can't wait to get to the point that I'm on stage and I don't have to think about what I'm saying," he says later. "The second my toe touches the stage to the second I walk off, people need to be on their asses laughing."

Despite Sy's unsophisticated joke content and imperfect delivery, his irreverence and youthful energy seem to win the audience over. He earns a wholehearted applause at the end and beams as he steps off the stage.

Following the show, Sy mingles with the other comics and audience members. He knows most of the other performers personally, as many of them frequent other open mics throughout the Twin Cities.

A man approaches Sy in the elevator as he leaves the venue. "You know, you funny. You really funny."

This man introduces himself as Polo G – he wears a striped polo shirt and Minnesota Twins hat. He explains that his friend is a booker at the Underground Music Café.

"I'mma give you his number," says Polo G with a smile. "Call him later tonight. I call him Deuce, but his real name is Greg."

“Thank you,” Sy says, collecting himself enough to get these words out. He wears an ear-to-ear smile that does not fade for the duration of his journey home.

Perched on a still barstool at the Macalester Grille, Sy dials the mystery number. Greg speaks in a gruff tone, but he seems eager to speak to this newfound talent. He wants Sy to perform this following Saturday at Underground Music Café, in a five-minute feature set.

Before Saturday, Sy will polish his set and deliver it again at the new venue. The momentum of this performance’s success will propel him towards more triumphs, he hopes. He cites Radio City Music Hall as his dream venue.

Most of Sy’s humor is low-brow and self-deprecating: poking fun at his height, hairiness, and Jewish identity. But his comedy allows him to embrace the parts of his identity that he is most insecure about, and poke fun at the world around him. He sees the implications of his comedy as more profound than the silliness of his jokes.

“In order to create a conversation about the most important things, you have to be willing to talk about anything in a comedic way,” Sy says. “I really, really believe that.”

It takes about 15 to 20 years for a comedian to reach headliner status. Most comedians never get there. But Sy’s passion for making others laugh outweighs his fear of never making it in the comedy world.