



Natasha Leggero: Funny, with pants or without

by Tom Keller

March 8, 2010



Natasha Leggero just keeps turning heads. A prolific stand-up performer whose intelligent musings earned her a regular seat on *Chelsea Lately*, she'll appear on Comedy Central's new post-apocalyptic series *Ugly Americans* premiering March 17.

She also has a starring role in an upcoming NBC pilot, *The Strip*, written by *Reno 911!* creators Tom Lennon and Ben Garant. If history proves anything, pants will be optional.

How much do you get to do stand-up now?

Too much. All the time. I've been doing pretty much five shows a week I'd say, or more when I'm traveling. I leave tomorrow to do a college, then I have shows all weekend in town. I have a pretty full schedule, and I'm starting to tour more. The hardest part is finding time to work on new bits, because when you're doing a week on the road, often times you don't want to do untested material. It depends on the place. Sometimes there are really good rooms for that with no pressure, but if you've got a higher crowd or a little more mainstream crowd, you really want to do what you know works. I have to perform in Los Angeles, usually for free, to work on new bits.

Duncan Trussell and I do a show at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery, a restored masonic lodge at the center of a cemetery. It's fun to have comics in there and react to being in a cemetery. I love performing in different places like that. In L.A., there are only three clubs, so if you want to get up a lot you kind of have to make up your own shows. I did a show with Maria Bamford and Melinda Hill called Tiger Lily every Monday at this restaurant, and I also played a Narcotics Anonymous meeting in the back of a thrift store in Anaheim. That was actually an amazing audience because they laughed at everything. They're so honored that you're just there to entertain them.

How do you adjust to a crowd like that?

When no one in the audience has any teeth, you want to be careful what you make fun of. It's

actually a common thing. I've played halfway houses right by my house, people not quite out of prison yet. They're just so happy that you've come. They're fun to play with, bring up on stage and talk to them. They're up for anything. There's kind of that element of danger.

What was your first experience as a performer?

I was acting as a child in theater productions – not a child star, I was somewhat normal. I didn't make money, I just was always somewhat doing it. I thought I wanted to be an actor, so I moved to New York and went to acting conservatory, then moved to L.A. and was kind of in shock by how people acted here. New York was more sophisticated, and everyone here seemed so dumb to me. I got on stage and talked about it once, which I didn't know was something you could do. I was just sort of reacting to what was around me. It was cool. When I thought of stand-up, I thought of Rodney Dangerfield. I didn't know you could just get on stage and talk about your life.

How long ago was that?

Eight years. It seems like such a long time ago. I didn't know any stand-ups when I started, and I felt kind of lucky that way. If I would have seen some of the stand-ups I know now, I would have chickened out. I was very naive – I didn't know anyone in the scene, I just had this outdated view of comedy of just like old men in suits. But now I love Zach Galifianakis, Todd Barry, Tig Notaro – she's hilarious, if I would have seen her before I started I would have been defeated. I love Louis C.K. It really does take time. It's cliché to say it takes 10 years, but I think it does. Different people struggle with different things.

What did you struggle with?

Being a stage actor as a child, I wasn't afraid to be on stage. Writing, I really struggled with. I really have to struggle to do it.

What's a pet peeve you have about the industry?

It's so outdated that because you're coming to the club, it has to be Ladies Night. They'll match you with other women or try to market it to ladies, which is fine but I just think it's unnecessary. Women all have to work now doing every job, including comic. You wouldn't say someone was a woman doctor or a woman lawyer.

I definitely don't like being brought up to a shit story, which seems to happen almost every time I'm on the road. I always say something to the club owner, and then either the middler or the host has this hilarious shit story which is usually that they shit their pants or they were about to shit their pants.

For some reason audiences love it, and they get so riled up by it they have to really switch gears. The lowest brow thing you can do is talk about having diarrhea in your pants. I'm not saying it can't be funny, it's just a hard thing for me to have to go up after. I really want the audience in a very specific place which is kind of to make fun of pop culture and ask people to already be looking at the world in a little different way. The opener can often prep that. A lot of club owners don't realize that you really are putting on a show, and it has to flow. You wouldn't have 50 Cent open for Judy Garland. It doesn't match. A lot of comics look at it in a sports way, that you should be able to follow anybody. I agree with that and understand that, but you really are orchestrating this thing.

Your website links out to the Jonas Brothers' website if you don't want to enter. How much are they paying you for that?

Nothing. Is it illegal to just link to the Jonas Brothers? I don't think we have the same crowd. I started making fun of them in my act after someone invited me to their show here as a joke and it was a matinee. They're doing shows at three in the afternoon and somehow counting as real music, which I thought was hilarious. After nap time but before bath time.

How would you describe your role on *The Strip*?

Tom Lennon plays a child star who wanted to open up and did open up this very fancy kind of

pretentious four-star restaurant and no one came, and so then he decided against his will to turn it into a hot wing joint and it became a huge success. I play a Hooters-esque waitress who's always hung over and likes to party. It's kind of based a character I did on *Reno 911!* I don't think I've ever had pants on when I've worked with them.

How did the *Reno 911!* role happen?

It was definitely my favorite acting job I've ever had, because they're such amazing improvisers that they make you seem like you're a brilliant improviser even though I didn't have much experience. I don't know how they do it. They're so funny, they're generous with their jokes. One scene, I was playing a pantsless hooker and they were arresting me. At one point, I stopped and said I needed a cigarette to the police.

Instead of the officer yelling, he says, 'OK, hold on.' He stops everything and looks around, which gave me a comic opportunity to start running and kind of taking over. I would have of course said, 'No, you can't have a cigarette, you're getting arrested.' They're so funny, they knew it would be a good comic moment. They make you funnier. This show is scripted, but I think there is going to be some improvisation.

How much experience did you have with that before working with them?

Doing stand-up eight or years, I definitely do crowd work because I get so sick of my act sometimes I'll be lazy and won't write until I get on stage, and that can often start by talking to the crowd. But that's a different type of thing than being a really generous improviser. Improvisers say yes and stand-ups say no. As a kind of point of view, a lot of stand-ups are always reacting to society negatively, saying what's wrong with everything. For the artform, it's always us against everybody. As an improviser, it's a lot more about teamwork.

What's the schedule like for the show now?

I've been hanging out at Hooters so I can do a little research. The girls at Hooters are hilarious. They're told to socialize with you, so the two times I've been in there all of them swarm around me, sit down and start talking about their bras and stuff. There's this super casual weird socializing thing. It's kind of like a strip joint for the girls who were raised better than to be strippers but are still kind of into flaunting their body and definitely not into anything cool, the outfit and everything. That's my homework.

How did you get started in acting?

It was a dumb story. I was kind of a troublemaker in 3rd grade, and I was just walking down the hall and the teacher grabbed me. I thought I was in trouble, but she said you have to be in the play. I loved it. My mom always kind of encouraged me, but she was definitely not a stage mom. From childhood on, I always kind of gravitated toward that. It was a nice place to get attention.

Do you remember what that first play was?

Great Expectations. I played this evil girl who this old lady teaches to be mean to men, and I kind of became that person. I didn't really understand in fourth grade what acting was. When I was older I sort of abandoned that, but my stage persona was kind of based on that first part I ever got.

When did you make that realization?

I never really fully did. I think right now as I talk to you about this, I'm just sort of realizing that. As a child, you don't really know what's happening. 'Oh, I guess this is me because I'm saying these words.' At least I didn't. Then I became nice in college. Let's hope.

Follow Natasha at natashaleggero.com or twitter.com/natashaleggero.

<http://punchlinemagazine.com/site/natasha-leggero-funny-with-pants-or-without/>