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**THEATER AND PERFORMING ARTS**

**STAND-UP COMEDY – ARTISTIC AND SOCIAL PHENOMENON**

**DOCTORAL THESIS**

**SUMMARY**

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*Luckily for us, laughter remains one of the energy forms of progress.*

Vasile Ghica

## SUMMARY

Stand-up comedy is like magic – it transforms people into smiling faces, it transforms the space in which it takes place into a space free from every-day cares, a space of good cheer, of relaxation. A spotlight, shining on a stage in a small comedy club, a venue with a red curtain behind, or a makeshift stage in a pub, and a comedian holding a microphone is all that is needed for this magic. A modern ritual of humor that transforms the space into a shrine to laughter.

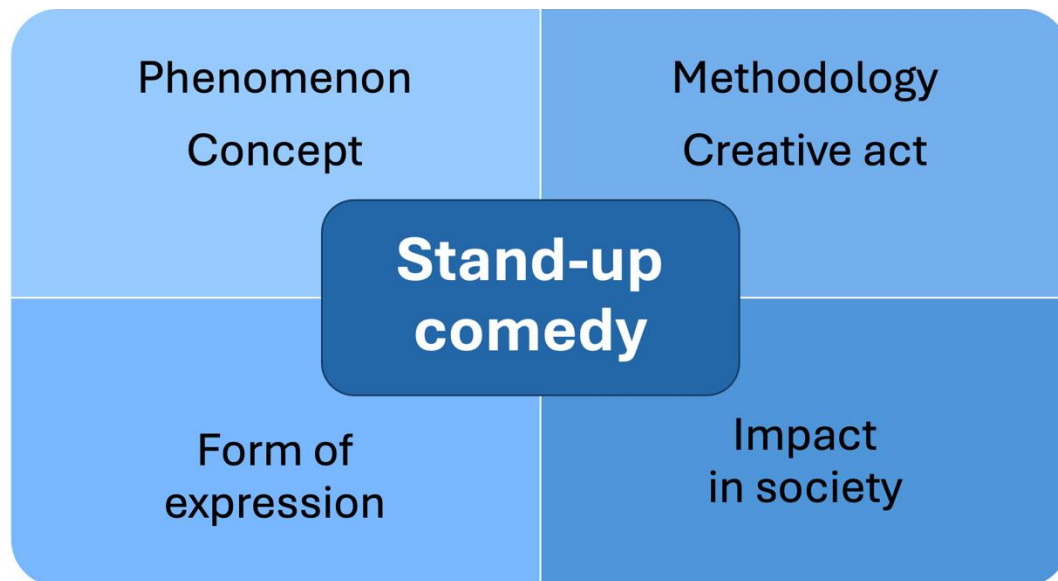
A short line opens windows to everyday ironies, to hidden truths. One line creates mirrors in which people can see themselves more clearly and more amusingly than ever before, gaining the courage to show the world who they are, to be closer to the truth. With a line, invisible links are created between unknown hearts, united by a chorus of laughter and applause. Lines that juggle with words and feelings, fabricating moments when life seems easier, problems evaporate under the cathartic force of collective laughter. Stand-up comedy is more than a form of entertainment, it is the art that can transform any banality into joy, the art that reminds us that no matter how hard it may be, there is always a reason to laugh.

At the time this doctoral thesis was based began, stand-up comedy was, and continues to be, a branch of comedy enjoyed by a large and extremely diverse audience, both in terms of age, genre, social, cultural, ethnic, reflecting the growing popularity of this entertainment genre worldwide.

The doctoral thesis *Stand-up Comedy – Artistic and Social Phenomenon* has a departure point in a necessity to frame, identify and define stand-up comedy from an artistic and social point of view in the research in the Romanian landscape. The phenomenon has deep roots in oral and folkloric traditions, but it developed as a distinct form of entertainment in the 20th century, especially in the United States and Great Britain. Over time it expanded its range of expression,

no longer just as a form of entertainment, but as a powerful tool for social commentary. Sensitive or controversial topics are tackled, sometimes humor becomes a means to criticize, or to push reflection on social, political or cultural issues. Stand-up comedy today is a complex form of performance art.

The scientific work in this thesis is centered on four fundamental thematic areas and structured in seven chapters. They were conceived through research (both theoretical and empirical analysis), and eventually by distilling the essential elements related to the stand-up comedy phenomenon.



This PhD thesis is intended to be a comprehensive analysis of both the evolution and structure of stand-up comedy. The research work carried out for this thesis has identified and emphasized theoretical, historical and practical aspects of this unique entertainment genre. I consider it essential to understand and conceptualize the phenomenon as it has psychological, cultural, social and economic implications. The following conclusions can be drawn from the paper:

Stand-up comedy occupies a central place in social dynamics as an essential component of public discourse and constitutes: (i) a tool for social analysis and criticism, allowing the free expression of ideas and exploring the limits of freedom of expression, (ii) an agent of social change, reflecting and shaping the values and structures of society, and (iii) a means of educating and influencing public opinion.

The first chapter of the thesis offers a comprehensive look at the evolution and structure of stand-up comedy, taking a journey back in time in search of the genre's ancestors. The fundamental

concepts underpinning comedy are explored: laughter, humor, comic and comedy. Laughter is a physiological reaction to external or internal stimuli, but it has an essential social and psychological role. Many of the world's greatest minds have devoted their time to unraveling the mysteries of humor induced laughter and understanding how it works. But no one has fully succeeded. In order to understand the complexity of the chosen subject area of stand-up comedy, **Chapter I** also examines several theories of humor developed in relation to, or building on, psychological, philosophical and linguistic theories. The subchapter devoted to the definition of stand-up comedy explains this art form, its specifics and characteristics, and then looking back in time through their prism, its predecessors are sought and analyzed in the context of historical and traditional influences. The emergence of the stand-up comedy phenomenon as a distinct cultural form is described through its historical development. The phenomenon became extremely popular in a relatively short period of time, with an industry rapidly forming around it. This industry is examined in terms of its commercial and professional aspects, as well as the role it plays in launching the careers of comedians. Finally, the end of the first chapter mentions the first schools dedicated to the training of stand-up comedians. Training in writing humorous material, improvisation and stage techniques in a controlled environment is as important as practice and experience in the process of developing a comedian's skills.

**Chapter II** offers a detailed reflection and analysis of the concept of stand-up comedy, highlighting the specifics of this art form. The distinct characteristics of stand-up comedy, compared to other forms of entertainment, are emphasized, with an emphasis on the direct and personal way of interacting with the audience. The chapter includes a small dictionary of common stand-up comedy terminology, essential for understanding the nuances and subtleties of the genre. It also discusses the importance of improvisation *versus* prepared text, highlighting how comedians balance spontaneity with pre-conceived material to keep shows fresh and engaging. Different styles of humor and their adaptation to different audiences are analyzed to highlight the versatility and diversity of the genre. The chapter explores liminal phenomena, highlighting the similarities and differences between stand-up comedy, one man / woman show and improvisational theater, emphasizing the fluid boundaries between these art forms. Applied theatrical theories and techniques are also discussed, noting the similarities between stand-up comedy and realist theater. Finally, the chapter examines the links between stand-up comedy and comedy journalism, highlighting common techniques and approaches that allow for incisive and humorous social commentary in both fields.

The thesis further explores the concept of freedom of expression in the context of stand-up comedy, highlighting the intersection between this art form and social and moral codes. **Chapter III** begins by discussing famous stand-up comedy artists who were pioneers in the struggle for freedom of expression, and offers a brief psychoanalytic analysis of their artistic activities, highlighting how they broke barriers and redefined the boundaries of what is acceptable in comedy. Recurring themes and mega-themes in stand-up comedy are also analyzed, with particular emphasis on the issue of vulgarity and offering a psychoanalytic perspective on why it is often present in stand-up performances. The chapter examines in detail the complex relationship between stand-up comedy and the concept of political correctness, discussing the challenges and dilemmas comedians face when tackling sensitive topics and when navigating the contemporary social landscape marked by a heightened focus on political correctness. Chapter III provides a broad look at how freedom of expression manifests and evolves in the field of stand-up comedy, highlighting both the historical influence of notable performers and current challenges related to the themes and language used in stand-up comedy. A key issue in stand-up comedy is freedom of expression with all that that means: codes and social / moral norms. Famous stand-up comedy artists who pioneered the fight for freedom of expression include Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, George Carlin, George Carlin, Jon Stewart, Roseanne Barr, Bill Hicks and others. I have proposed a broad analysis of how freedom of expression manifests itself and evolves in the field of stand-up comedy, bearing in mind that stand-up comedy is part of popular comedy and its performers touch in their shows on serious issues facing society, on topics of social and political relevance, in an approach considered more or less fair.

Absolutely essential in stand-up comedy is the interaction with the audience. With this in mind, the interaction between the comedian and the audience is addressed in **Chapter IV** which also investigates the psycho-sociology of consumers of the genre. The different styles of humor are examined in relation to the personality types of comedians and audiences, emphasizing the importance of tailoring content to resonate with different groups of viewers. The chapter then explores the dynamic relationship between comedian and audience, emphasizing how real-time interaction and reactions contribute to the success of a stand-up show. The role of stand-up comedy in social change is discussed in detail, highlighting how humor can provoke reflection and influence social opinions and behaviors. Audience interaction and psycho-social dynamics influence and enrich the stand-up comedy experience through the lively relationship established between the comedian and the audience, which contributes to the success of a stand-up show and at the same



time provokes reflection, influencing opinions and social behaviors. Once again, unique challenges and stereotypes faced by female stand-up comedians were identified. These greatly hinder their journey in the industry. In a world historically dominated by men, women often encounter skepticism about their ability to be funny, a deeply ingrained stereotype that undermines their talent and efforts. Women also have to navigate an environment often marked by sexism and harassment, both on stage and backstage. Another major hurdle is the pressure to tackle topics deemed appropriate for women, often avoiding taboo or controversial subjects that might be more readily accepted if presented by their male colleagues. However, female comedians have shown remarkable resilience, using their platform to break down these barriers and tackle a wide range of topics, including those related to gender and identity. Many female comedians take on mentoring roles for new generations, helping to create a more inclusive and diverse environment in stand-up comedy. This determination not only enriches the comedy scene, but also inspires positive changes in the perception and acceptance of comedians of all genres.

Perceptions of female stand-up comedians are examined, discussing the unique challenges, prejudices and stereotypes they face in the comedy industry.

Finally, the chapters explore benefits of humor and its applicability to various fields of work, highlighting the ways in which laughter and comedy can enhance both personal well-being and professional effectiveness. Chapter IV thus provides a broad look at how audience interaction and psycho-social dynamics influence and enrich the stand-up comedy experience.

Recall that the author of this research is a stand-up comedian with over 15 years of experience in the field. **Chapter V** provides a detailed look into the comedian's 'inner laboratory', exploring the comedian's life through an empirical study. It begins by analyzing the comedy writing process, discussing the structure, formulas, tools, and construction techniques used to create funny and effective material. The chapter details the different types of jokes used in stand-up comedy, providing concrete examples to illustrate the variety and complexity of humor. Essential tricks in joke writing and delivery are presented, highlighting the subtle aspects that can turn an ordinary joke into a memorable moment. The creation of spontaneous humor is also examined, emphasizing the importance of improvisation skills and quick reactions in front of a live audience. The chapter addresses presentation and delivery techniques in stand-up comedy, discussing the importance of timing, intonation and body language in delivering jokes effectively. Another key aspect discussed is the unusual nature of the comedian's craft, exploring the unique challenges and rewards of the profession. The chapter also includes a section on the development

towards becoming a comedian, looking at problems, opinions and personal experiences of those in the industry.

The present research encountered difficulties, as it was conducted during the Covid19 pandemic. **Chapter VI** in the thesis was an impossible chapter to foresee at the outset of this study, as it examines the impact of the Covid19 pandemic on stand-up comedy, highlighting the significant changes in the industry and the adaptations needed to cope with the new realities. Beginning with an analysis of the overall impact of the pandemic on cultural and entertainment events, the chapter explores how actors and comedians have been affected by the disruption of live performances and the restrictions imposed by social distancing. Particular attention is paid to the adaptation of stand-up comedy to the online environment, highlighting how performances have been filmed without a live audience and streamed on digital platforms. It discusses the challenges and opportunities involved in this transition to the online environment, as well as how comedians have managed to maintain audience interaction and engagement in an online environment. Stand-up comedy performances in socially distanced settings are also analyzed, including the adaptations and restrictions necessary to ensure the safety of the audience and performers. These issues are also discussed with other comedians. The chapter highlights how these changes have influenced the performance of stand-up and the lives of comedians, how the new challenges have been managed from a logistical and creative perspective. In a way, Chapter V, highlights the resilience and creativity in the industry in the face of unprecedented challenges.

The final chapter in this thesis looks at the therapeutic role of laughter and humor, examining, firstly, the use of laughter as therapy in stressful times and environments and highlighting the positive effects of humor on mental and emotional health. The chapter then examines how stand-up comedy can have a profound impact on active military and war veterans, providing a form of liberation and healing through humor. Laughter and humor are therapeutic and stand-up comedy can save lives. This thesis presents some examples that support this claim. Case studies and concrete examples are presented to illustrate how stand-up comedy performances have brought joy, bonding and emotional support to the military community. An important aspect of the chapter is an empirical study of a performance by the author of this paper on a military base in Romania, which highlights the positive impact of humor on the morale and well-being of military personnel, as well as the challenges and rewards of a stand-up comedian performing in an area that is different from civilian life. *Stand-up comedy with Diana Roșca*, was a show for Romanian Air Force servicemen, performed at the 71st Air Base "General Emanoil Ionescu" in Câmpia Turzii.

Chapter VII also presents a research project of the author entitled *Let's laugh to be healthy*, implemented education contexts, which explores the therapeutic benefits of laughter and humor among children and young people. In doing so, **Chapter VII** provides a profound and poignant insight into how humor and stand-up comedy can have a positive and transformative impact in the lives of active military and veterans, children and youth, highlighting the healing power of laughter in the face of difficult situations and trauma. The two projects are also living proof that laughter has healing power in the face of difficult situations and trauma.

Stand-up comedy plays an essential role in mirroring and shaping contemporary society. By its very nature, this art form is deeply grounded in reality, with comedians using humor to address and highlight social, political and cultural issues. They have the unique ability to turn serious and complex subjects into accessible and engaging moments of reflection for the general public. Through satire and irony, stand-up comedians challenge inequalities, cultural and social stereotypes, offering critical and often revealing insights. This approach not only stimulates dialog and awareness, but also contributes to changing public perceptions and attitudes. For example, topics such as racism, sexism, corruption and other systemic issues are frequently analyzed and presented in a light that encourages introspection and change. Stand-up comedians sometimes take on the role of personality shapers, influencing their audience's behavior and thinking through their humor and messages. By exposing the absurdities of some social norms, they succeed in inspiring critical thinking and an openness to diversity and inclusion. Stand-up comedy's constant connection to the real world makes it not just a form of entertainment but also a powerful tool for education and social change. In an increasingly complex and fragmented world, stand-up comedians provide a fulcrum, helping to make navigating everyday challenges one accompanied by a smile and a deeper understanding of the reality around us. The role of stand-up comedy in comedy journalism should be emphasized here once again. Jokes used in journalism increase the attention of the people to whom they are addressed and directly help to change the mood of society.

Stand-up comedy, with its ability to transcend cultural and social barriers, not only provides us with moments of laughter, but also mirrors the complexity of humanity, revealing deep truths and challenging us to reflect and evolve in a changing world. This art form, grounded in everyday reality and contemporary issues, serves as a catalyst for dialog and social change, inviting the audience to look beyond the surface and re-evaluate their beliefs and prejudices. Stand-up comedy remains a vital and dynamic force, capable of combining humor with introspection, giving us a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the society we live in.